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Correspondence

Bland illusion

Cambridge, Mass.

To the Editors: John Garvey may be worried about "blandness" in Roman Catholicism, ["Bad Thoughts," Mar. 30] but I think his article points to a more crucial issue.

In our efforts to humanize ("Christianize"?) Catholicism, I often wonder if we, at the same time, have lost our sense of the Holy. "Blandness" is actually an exclusive horizontal or vertical understanding of Catholic Christianity.

(REV. MR.) RICHARD A. BOYD

Stars and bars

Washington, D.C.

To the Editors: As one of fifty national organizations or prominent individuals supporting the campaign to Stop The Olympic Prison, we from the American Friends Service Committee were very pleased to see the hard-hitting criticism of the Lake Placid prison conversion plan by the Reverend Graham Hodges [Mar. 30].

The United States incarcerates 250 people per 100,000, an extraordinarily high per capita rate exceeded only by South Africa among Western nations. According to most experts, eighty percent of the people behind bars in this country could be released with no added danger to the community. Eighty-nine percent of the federal prison commitments each year are for nonviolent offenses. The plan to convert athletes' housing for the 1980 Winter Olympics into a federal prison will lay bare the shame of our prisons to the entire world. The Federal Bureau of Prisons has either opened or is now constructing 20 new prisons in the past ten years, for an additional 10,000 prison cells. Ought Americans not be concerned about halting the expansion of our own prison archipelago?

The Congressional Budget Office has shown that there is a 94 percent correlation between unemployment rates in the United States and prison admissions. The United States could justly be accused of hypocrisy, since this country preaches human rights abroad while we deny economic and social justice at home.

I urge your readers who are concerned about the horrors of the Olympic Prison and the massive overuse of incarceration in this country to write Senator Edward Kennedy (Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C. 20510) and President Carter (The White House, Washington, D.C., 20500). Thank you.

STEPHEN W. ANGELL
AFSC Organizer for Stop
The Olympic Prison

Open Christology

Hollis, N.Y.

To the Editors: Your reviewer's opinion [Mar. 16] that Edward Schillebeeckx's *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* is beyond the reach of the general reader is probably a reasonable and responsible one. However, in this instance forgoing the conventional scholarly wisdom would be appropriate.

It is true that the prohibitive price and the sheer bulk of the book may make it almost inaccessible to the reader at large. But if your reviewer is right and the book "has rich pastoral potential" then sooner or later its contents will be made accessible to churchgoers on a second- or third-hand basis. In that case the sooner more readers are exposed to its contents directly the more authentic its true value will be. Otherwise we may be fed snippets of Schillebeeckx's Christology from below incorporated with the more traditional and familiar Christology from above in our sermons and books without any hint or warning that a revolutionary change is occurring.

Now that the Catholic Church has become less censorious and authoritarian it is almost inevitable that we are going to encounter more frustrations and difficulties in wrestling with traditional doctrine. On the other hand it could be a decided benefit if Christology from below were brought to the open forum to see how well it jibes with the understanding and experience of the faithful at large. Such a policy could make it harder for Christology to become the preserve of erudite specialists. It is not a question of their good intentions or impeccable intellectual integrity but a question of the preservation of common doctrine.

ROLAND LAIRD

Squander unto Caesar

Franklin, N.C.

To the Editors: Thomas Power's cogent analysis, "The Next War" [Mar. 30], left out, not surprisingly, the church. Before we give up entirely, could not the church press suggest the remote possibility that an aroused church might yet direct formidable attention to the ways of peace? Could it not start by considering the teaching and life of Jesus Christ in respect to the making of nuclear weapons, their purpose, their planned use? Should it not consider the advisability of Christians continuing to pay taxes for these weapons? commissioning murder?

Milton Mayer, in an address to the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, pointed out that the ultimate purpose of our armed forces is "to inflict intolerable pain on human beings without regard to their individual guilt or innocence." But he admitted knowing one man with greater guilt: "He it is who is so hopelessly lost to Christianity, morality, history, and common sense that he is willing to squander his and his country's substance on your hire and corruption. . . . He is the American taxpayer . . . His name is Milton Mayer." His name is legion.

(REV.) HOWARD W. LULL

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LOSING OUR BALANCE

AMERICANS have every right to be angry about their taxes, but not for the reasons that are commonly given. Do we pay too much in taxes? It's impossible to define "too much" in the abstract; measured by the pain felt when shelling out on April 14 or when examining the deductions from the weekly paycheck, almost any sum might be considered "too much." The fact remains that Americans have a lighter tax burden than the citizens of almost all other industrialized nations, a number of which manage to provide both a better range of social services and a steadier economy than the U.S. But Americans have a right not only to complain about what they get for their money, but about the unfair way in which the burden of paying it is distributed. The federal tax system "is a disgrace to the human race," declared a well-known amnesiac when he ran for president a few years ago. The state systems are even worse. Thanks to such regressive measures as the sales tax, in 47 out of 50 states a family earning $5,000 a year will have to pay a greater percentage of its income in state and local taxes than a family earning $50,000 a year. Rising social security taxes are another regressive levy that has increased the burden on average income households at twice the rate it has affected high income brackets. Between the mid-'50s and the mid-'70s, the percentage of an average family income going for taxes doubled; if the family had earned four times as much, its tax burden would have increased at only half that rate. Over the same years, the proportion of taxes paid by corporations has declined and that paid by individuals steadily increased. On top of this, there are special situations like the California real estate boom that sent the assessed value of homes sky high in a few years, often doubling real estate taxes and prompting the reaction that led, absent any corrective move by the California legislature, to Proposition 13.

But Proposition 13 illustrates how thoroughly the American taxpayer's revolt against unfairness is being channeled into further unfairness. By now it is well known that of the $7 billion tax cutback resulting from Proposition 13, homeowners will get a little less than $2 billion. The bulk will go to out-of-state and local corporations and apartment-house owners. Though Proposition 13 expressed a complaint against distant bureaucracy, it will in fact increase federal revenues (since deductions for real-estate taxes will drop) and state power over schooling and public services, and of course it will increase the relative power of landlords and property-owning corporations. The same channeling is now at work on the national level in the furor over a balanced budget amendment and other legislative variations on the same theme.

Liberals have had to spend so much time arguing that balancing the budget is not the end-all of government policy, that it often looks as if they oppose balanced budgets on principle. There is certainly no reason to do so. In theory anyway, the social services and government initiatives liberals have traditionally favored are as

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possible under balanced budgets as unbalanced ones, the only difference being that the taxes to pay for them must be forthcoming immediately. Such a regimen would possibly force politicians to be candid and responsible about what they were spending money for; and indeed some critics of U.S. defense spending are entertaining the fond notion that a balanced-budget requirement would enforce some limits on Pentagon expansion. The obvious problem is that "immediately" may not be the best time to raise taxes for necessary expenditures—as in a slumping economy or a war. And so the balanced budgeteers begin to complicate their proposal with various escape hatches—a balanced budget in all years of 3 percent real growth, or a balanced budget except in cases of "national emergency."

Beyond this, there is the less obvious problem that a "balanced budget" is subject to matters of definition, and redefinition. Simply separate capital outlays and current expenditures, as do states with constitutional balanced-budget restrictions, or eliminate the federal grants to states and municipalities (so vehemently crying for fiscal stringency) and—presto!—the federal government would have its balanced budget today.

But the real problem with the balanced budget furor is its effective channeling of political concern in the wrong direction. Though the tax revolt began in the states, it has been aimed at Washington by state legislators happy to get off the hook and big business which knows where its real interests lie. The federal deficit is neither the monster the budgeteers make it nor the key to all our inflation ills. However nice it would be not to pay out all that interest on the national debt, the fact remains that *as a percentage of the gross national product*, the national debt has decreased significantly in recent years (and decreased by over two-thirds since 1946). The federal debt has run far behind the increase in private and corporate debt, and of course behind the growth in the economy. A glance at other measures of federal growth, like numbers employed, supports this picture. Likewise the link between high deficits and high inflation is simply not there. Walter Heller recently reminded the public of the sizable deficits run between 1959 and 1965—with an inflation rate of slightly more than 1 percent a year. Nor will the kind of budget cuts envisioned by most of the balanced budgeteers—and by an administration trying to cut them off at the pass—have anything more than symbolic value in the fight against inflation, although what is symbolism to others can be a precious hold on survival for the most vulnerable members of our society.

The various proposals to restrict federal expenditure to some fixed percentage of the gross national product or limit increases in spending to the rise in GNP do not even have the redeeming features of the balanced budget idea. Fundamentally this is an effort to repair an oversight of the Founding Fathers by writing today's capitalism into the Constitution. It would set up a barrier to any desire to alter the economy democratically. Behind the issue of taxes and budget is, as always, the issue of power. The federal government is the only force capable of limiting the power of giant corporations, which are like the rest of us in thinking that problems can best be solved their own way but unlike the rest of us in having vast resources at their disposal for doing this. The states are at the mercy of corporations and capital that threaten to go elsewhere; almost all the states now offer tax breaks to attract industry and wealth, competing against one another to the point that no one wins but the large firms and corporate leaders who enjoy these concessions. Only the federal government (and with the growth of multinationals, sometimes not even the federal government) can match this power.

That is why the "tax revolt" has turned to Washington, encouraged by sophisticated advertising campaigns and thorough-going lobbying. That the vehicle for this development should be a proposed constitutional convention, one surrounded by uncertainties about its proper form and legitimate scope of action, is all the more disturbing. No amount of pre-convention theorizing would be definitive once such a convention assembled and went to work. *If* a real examination of the role of government and its powers of taxation was underway, *if* a full range of alternative proposals had the public's ear—we are thinking of Tom Hayden's provocative coupling of the balanced budget with a guarantee of full employment, or other schemes that might match limits on government with limits on corporate size and independence—then we might welcome a Great Debate. As things stand, the whole exercise tends toward very dangerous mischief.

Six months ago, the capital-gains tax was reduced. The same arguments were heard then: it would unleash productivity, decrease inflation. Now the papers report no such results, outside of another loss to the Treasury. But we need even further tax cuts, comes the reply, echoing what the oil companies have said about their remarkable profits. What Americans are being asked is to switch their "taxes" from an all-too-distant federal bureaucracy they barely control through their votes to various private bureaucracies they control even less. The country had better think twice.

A PERSONAL PAPACY

It has been two months since the appearance of *Redemptor Hominis*, Pope John Paul II's encyclical. The response has been muted, though not at all disapproving. It is easy to understand why. Unlike the Pope's Holy Thursday letter that reaffirmed the Latin rite's commitment to priestly celibacy, the encyclical had no immediate administrative implication. It was, as was the letter, an intensely personal document, the sort that elicits reflection rather than controversy. The letter, like the first reports on the Pope's visit to Puebla, has inspired a new outburst of nervousness, partially because of the definite position on celibacy but also because some question the amount of consultation and information that preceded it. It is clear that despite a resignation to a papacy that seemed distant from their lives, brought on by the disappointment of *Humanae Vitae* and the general melancholy of Pope Paul's latter years, many American Catholics immediately rebounded to place great hope on the clearly extraordinary individual who is Karol Wotyla.

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In this sense, the encyclical merits their careful reading. It contains a strong commitment to three themes of Vatican II: open, though tempered, discussion in the church; ecumenism; and collegiality. More central, however, is its focus not on the church per se but on Christ and, in the mystery of the Incarnation, on human dignity. For John Paul II, this dignity is threatened by the way in which, without "rational and honest planning," the very accomplishments of humankind turn back against their creators. Human dignity is threatened by the disparity between rich societies and poor and by the curtailment of human rights. The Pope endorses no political formulas but insists on the Christian call to faithful service and on the uniting power of the Eucharist.

Redemptor Hominis expresses an intergrated personal vision. At one level, such a personal approach—and again the Holy Thursday letter comes to mind—may conflict with the Pope's institutional responsibilities. At another level, it may be exactly what will establish a new kind of papal authority in an age when people will not honor the keys of Peter because they can fetter but because they can liberate.

Of several minds: *Frank Getlein*

SAFE AGAINST BRECHT

THE REAL THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY

AT LAST IT IS clear beyond denial: the greatest danger to national security is national security. Right now, this minute, national security is ensuring that criminals walk the street not even brought to trial let alone vigorously prosecuted, that freedom of the press is curtailed, that the country lives in the serious risk of blowing itself up accidently if not on purpose—the only way to save it, fellows,—and that if by some miracle we do escape national incineration we are headed inescapably for national bankruptcy in the name of national security. All these manifestations of our national security madness have been around for some time, but it does seem that in the last couple of months individual outrages have been turning up with increasing speed and enormity.

There was a matched pair of cases that tell us a lot we wish weren't true about national security. Frank Snepp was a CIA man in Saigon during the last days of the American adventure there. He got out and wrote a book pointing out in some detail what was widely known even without detail, namely that the Agency had fallen all over itself in Vietnam. The author also had some unflattering things to report about Ambassador Graham Martin's conduct before and during the grand exit. The Justice Department brought suit, even while admitting no classified documents of any kind had been used in the book, no national security "secrets" were revealed, except the long-public one of CIA ineptitude. A compliant judge ruled viciously against the author and the case is now on appeal.

Meanwhile, Graham Martin himself left Saigon with a trunkful of secret, sensitive documents, in violation of law, carelessly left them in an unlocked car, in violation of another law, and thus allowed them to be stolen. For this, the Justice Department has announced that it will do nothing. The general belief is that Martin took the documents in order to write a book defending himself against charges he anticipated in a book by Henry Kissinger based on secret documents *he* has taken with him. Certainly one must sympathize with anyone's felt need to defend himself from Kissingerian attack, but still the Justice Department's handling of the two cases, so close together, does make you wonder what President Carter had in mind when he talked about identical treatment for small-time crooks and "big shot" crooks. Not much, apparently.

For connoisseurs of national security idiocy, however, the prize item in that permanent story recently has been the news that for 13 years the FBI kept an eye on Bertolt Brecht, the late, great playwright.

O.K., granted the FBI are now and always have been a bunch of idiots, scared stiff at the prospect of the Red Menace worming its way into America the Beautiful disguised as medical insurance, a living wage or other Commie plots. Even so. Bert Brecht. Surabaya Johnny. Show me duh vay to duh next vhiskey bar. Oh, don't ask vy, Oh don't ask vy! Just a jackknife has Macheath, dear, and he keeps it out of sight.

Were they serious? They were serious. Questions arise not about the freedom of the artist—or anyone else in a society blessed with the FBI. The artist was in good shape. His wife used to amuse herself dictating recipes from a Polish cookbook into her tapped telephone. But what about the taxpayers who paid for all this nonsense? Sometime, somewhere, somehow, there has to be a kind of Proposition 13 in favor of sanity, pulling our increasingly hard-earned dollars out of the hands of the national security freaks who will cheerfully spend everything the country can produce in pursuit of the phantom goal of total security. Sure, they'd be happy to—have done, every time they got the chance—trample on the Bill of Rights in defense against the godless atheists of the Kremlin who may be no farther away than the neighborhood meeting of the PTA—after all, they're discussing handicapped children—but the offence of the security maniacs that will finally turn the Republic against them is the sheer cost for the sheer total lack of results.

Brecht, for instance. Nothing. Thirteen years and nothing. Trench-coated agents slithering into basement monitoring stations, subverting the mails and making them the ruin they are today,

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carefully filing reports on the latest production of *Mother Courage* as being subversively opposed to the Thirty Years War. For thirteen years, and nothing. Can we afford this kind of expense? What about tightening the old belt? What about cutting down the dread federal bureaucracy? The budget? Offhand, can you think of a better place to start than firing the poet-playwright squad, hiring in its place a G-3 clerical to clip reviews from the *Times* and *Variety?* Wouldn't the reviews tell us all we need to know, namely that the dangerous playwrights are once more coming out for social amelioration, against tyranny? Since neither of those positions—pro-amelioration, against tyranny—has yet been or is likely to be declared a crime in this country, outside the mind of J. Edgar Hoover, could we just call the whole thing off?

It is true the FBI's shadowing of Brecht had a note or two of redeeming social value. The way we all found out about the case was through a professor of literature, James K. Lyon, who brought a freedom of information action against the bureau to get selected items from its 1,000 page report on Brecht covering the last 13 years of his life. Dr. Lyon found some private letters—presumably filched from the U.S. mails,—that showed a rare tenderness in Brecht. That's something, although as Dr. Lyon noted, "One must also ask if the enormous amounts of time, energy and money spent . . . were justified, not to mention the moral and legal implications such an operation has."

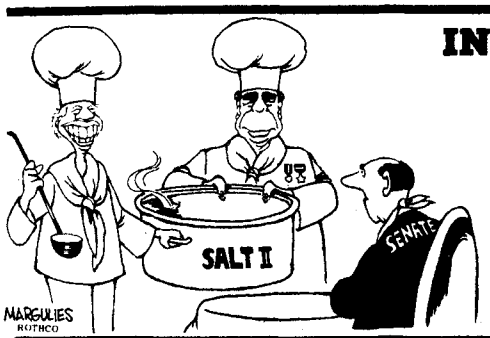
One must, but it seemed unlikely anyone but Dr. Lyon will, certainly not the Justice Department devoted to sheltering from justice members of the department found out to have committed criminal acts against the populace at large. The formula now exists in the case of L. Patrick Gray, under whose leadership of the FBI the burglaries against the Socialist Workers Party were committed. Gray is let off because he would have to violate national security to defend himself. Instead Justice will try the underlings. Predictably, the underlings will subpoena Gray as a witness, namely to testify that he told them to go out and break in to organizations with non-Nixonian views. Thereupon Justice will drop the case rather than risk the shattering of national security with the news that the Nixonians were crooks.

It all goes beyond Nixon, of course. The Monster of San Clemente was just the caricature of a national security madness shared by all administrations since about 1947. Oddly enough, the growth of the madness has paralleled the growth of the military panoply and the crepe-soled shoe squads that are supposed to be ensuring our security. The more weapons we get, and the deadlier, the more we tremble. The more illegal FBI-CIA operations we mount against our own citizens, the more we fear for our security. Since that correlation is public knowledge and easily demonstrable, you would think someone would draw the obvious conclusions: namely that if we cut back on military spending, we'd be more secure, if we got the government burglars out into the private sector, we'd sleep better at night.

The essential error in making national security the top national consideration it has been for 30 years is that there is no such thing as national security. We are trying to achieve an absolute degree of a quality extremely difficult even to define. This is why otherwise sane executive office-holders go bananas at the mention of the two little words, "national security."

They are in pursuit of an impossible dream and the very pursuit moves the dream ever farther from attainment. By all means throw shadows, bugs, mail intercepts, whatever, on Bertolt Brecht. It isn't that we know Brecht is guilty—as in fact he turned out not to be—but that we don't know he's innocent. Money is no object. Hit him. If madness in action is defined as an inappropriate response, national security is crazy as a coot and so are most of the people caught up in its delusions.

FRANK GETLEIN



IN THE END POLITICS WILL COUNT

SALT sellers

PETER KOVLER

BECAUSE THEY have been so arcane and so abstract, debates about nuclear war, nuclear arms and nuclear strategies have almost always provoked boredom or bewilderment. Doubtless this held true on Capitol Hill where the basic politician, even the most well-meaning one, was often ill at ease with the Pentagon's acronymic jargon of MIRVs, ABMs, ICBMs, etc. etc. But along came the nuclear power plant accident at Three Mile Island and, even though there are few real similarities between meltdowns and mushroom clouds, in Washington (which is only 150 miles from Harrisburg) the dangers of the nuclear age have suddenly become awesomely real.

Add to this phenomenon the escalating fear of The Russians. Then, consider that the United States Senate is the current political home of at least six publicity-starved presidential candidates. And, all together, it makes the upcoming

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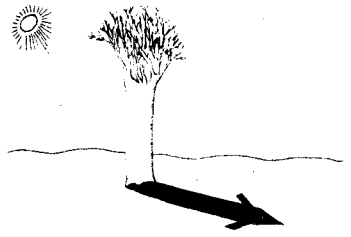
Senate ratification of the treaty to emerge from the latest Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT II) the most interesting and important foreign policy issue since the Vietnam war.

Americans and Russians are now negotiating the final details on how to limit the arms race. Soon after the treaty is signed, the Carter administration will have to submit it to the Senate where two-thirds approval is necessary. Most observers now predict that the Senate will not act hastily but will take about six months (four months in Committees, two in the full Senate) before it finally casts the ayes and nays. It is also generally believed that the Senate's approval or disapproval will shape the future of the relationship between the two superpowers.

Between now and next fall, of course, anything can happen. Despite this interval the treaty's friends and foes have started to campaign aggressively for their causes. Each side is spending millions of dollars, sending speakers all over the country and feverishly trying to marshal the political troops.

At first glance the imminent brouhaha seems like a repeat of every other foreign policy debate (as well as every high-school



debate topic) in this country since 1945. That is, of course, are the Russians coming or not? To all but the professional arms control activist, the arguments, rhetorical questions, scenarios, theories and syllogisms provide an enormour sense of déjà vu. Said one congressional aide, "The question now is 'can we trust them after Iran?' Well, if you replaced Iran with Vietnam or Cuba or Hungary or Berlin, you'd understand why I think it all sounds alike." It is because of such indifference, and even occasional lethargy, that both sides have begun to fight so early.

The Carter administration is already holding coordinating meetings two or three times per week. Gathering together are representatives from the White House, the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (of the State Department), the European Affairs Office of the State Department, the Department of Defense, the National Security Council, the White House legislative liaison office and the State Department legislative liaison office. Administration "salesmen" have been assigned their respective territories.

Defense Secretary Harold Brown—with the impeccable credentials that anyone in his position carries—goes to speak to conservative audiences like the Council on Foreign Relations. Zbigniew Brzezinski, no slouch himself on the Russians, talks to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. Meanwhile the State Department sends its lower echelon spokesmen to Chambers of Commerce in smaller cities.

At the same time the head of congressional liaison, Frank Moore, is ceaselessly solicitious as he brings senators and their staffs up-to-date. As one aide told me, "Eighty senators have been briefed, another twenty will soon know our viewpoint. No senator will be able to say that he wasn't adequately informed." Also, the office of Anne Wexler, Assistant to the President, tries to nurture grass roots support by talking to the leaders of national organizations.

To those who believe in the administration's view, the campaign is being conducted shrewdly and intelligently. But to those who oppose the treaty, this campaign seems deceptive. This is because each speaker tends to tell his or her audience what it is believed the audience wants to hear. Even though this is obviously nothing new in American politics, it endangers the credibility of the administration. So, for instance, when Harold Brown delivered a speech in early April, he said that even with approval of the treaty the U.S. would be free to proceed with unlimited spending on strategic forces as well as increased spending on new weapons like the MX mobile Intercontinental Missile. But when the State Department sends out Paul Warnke, the former chief SALT negotiator who is generally perceived as a dove, the emphasis is on how to end the "mindless" arms race.

MEANWHILE in the Senate there is organization fever. Something called the Cranston group (named after California Senator Alan Cranston) consists of 20 members and they are for arms control. Then there is the Coalition For Peace Through Strength, made up of the unalterably opposed Senators like Robert Dole, Paul Laxalt, Orin Hatch, Jake Garn and Jesse Helms. They are said to meet regularly to map strategy to defeat the Treaty. And then there is the SALT Study Group (also know as the undecided Senators For SALT) led by Senators John Melcher and William Roth. Consisting of ten senators none of whom are on the Foreign Relations or Armed Services Committees, the Group tries to get regular briefings from the experts. And, finally, there are the Freshmen Senators For SALT who apparently want it to be known that they won't be bullied by their seniors. In short, on any given day on Capitol Hill there will probably be several meetings on SALT.

While counting votes is one of the favorite types of idle conversation in Washington, there are some good informal estimates on the positions taken so far by the members of the upper chamber. There are about 40 senators who now support a treaty, about 17 who are irrevocably opposed and about 43 who do not know. The administration believes that "once the facts are known" it will get the needed 27.

For the most part the SALT salesmen are worried about the threat from the right. With the rise of neoconservatism and the accompanying belief in Russian belligerence, the administration knows whom it has to appease. As during the Panama Canal debate last year, the administration fears being cast as the leaders of a declining superpower. While there has been some fear of desertion from the left (Senators McGovern and

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Hatfield think the administration may be making too many compromises with conservatives), the White House is certainly not alarmed by the prospects. Said one administration aide, "We take McGovern and Hatfield seriously but we still don't know their significance."

Handicappers of the Senate now point out about six senators whose views will sway colleagues. They are Senators Stennis, Jackson, Moynihan, Robert Byrd, Baker and John Glenn. Stennis, head of the Armed Services Committee, has some of the best right-wing credentials in modern U.S. history. If he goes with the administration then others will have a hard time accusing the administration of "selling out." For decades now, Henry Jackson has made a unique reputation for himself as a hardliner. Jackson is the leading proponent of the linkage theory—that SALT cannot be considered in isolation from other Russian activities such as the treatment of dissidents or expansion in Africa. In fact it is said that one of the reasons the Russians are permitting Jews to leave at such a relatively high rate (4,500 in March) is in recognition of the administration's political needs. Moynihan, like Jackson, has the well-deserved reputation of an anti-Soviet. He is also considered well informed and able to make a convincing case for whichever side he takes.

Then, of course, Majority Leader Byrd has great influence because of the power of his position. Howard Baker's support is universally considered crucial because he is the Minority Leader and because middle-of-the-road Republicans seem to follow his lead. As Baker has already announced his intentions to run for president it is clear that he could use SALT to get himself some public attention. In early April, for instance, he declared that there would have to be several changes in the treaty before he could support it. The pronouncement is reported to have upset the White House, which recalls how crucial Baker's support was in the debate on the Panama Canal treaties. But if Baker wants to win the Republican nomination he will have to protect his right flank against Reagan, Crane and Connally. And that gives him the best reason of all to vote against the treaty. Finally, John Glenn has made himself an expert on what may be the single most important issue in the debate, verification. If Glenn believes that the agreements can be corroborated, in all likelihood he will go along. But, at present, he is playing it down the middle and his stand is still unknown.

Perhaps the most influential figures will be several foreign policy leaders from our recent past. Foremost is Henry Kissinger. The administration needs his support if it is to win over centrist Republicans. Gerald Ford is another in that same category. Going a little farther back, the administration would like to be supported by such "hawks" as Dean Rusk. Several big names have already announced opposition, including Melvin Laird and former Admirals Thomas Moore and Elmo Zumwalt. However much these men may seem like ghosts to the public, senators still listen ot their advice.

Among the U.S.'s European allies, it appears that German Chancellor Schmidt, French President Giscard d'Estaing and Prime Minister Callaghan will back it. If Margaret Thatcher wins in Great Britain, however, her support is doubtful.

BUT AS ANY freshman political science textbook will tell you, there are several factors in a senator's decision, probably the most important being his belief that he is adequately reflecting his constituents. Come October, a typical senator will probably look at two lists of distinguished names, those who approve and those who don't, and then decide that since the experts disagree he is best off going along with the gut response of his voters. Realizing the likelihood of that occurrence, both pro- and anti-treaty forces are at work.

The Committee on the Present Danger is a Washington-based pro-defense organization which has distributed documents and sent speakers throughout the country. Their chief strategist is Paul Nitze, a former Secretary of the Navy and former SALT negotiator. Nitze says, "We should reject the treaty. We should add $4 billion to $5 billion to the defense budget." In addition, there are groups like the American Conservative Union which has already spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on an advertising campaign to defeat the accords. Among other things, they are sending around a film called "Soviet Might and American Myth: The United States in Retreat." It has already been shown on more than 200 TV stations. And finally the direct mail wizard of the right wing, Richard Viguerie, plans to flood senators with anti-SALT mail.

Just as aware of the importance of public pressure is the Americans for SALT. With non-administration leaders such as Clark Clifford, former Undersecretary of the Air Force Townsend Hoopes, Henry Cabot Lodge, former Ambassador to the U.N. Charles Yost, Rev. Theodore Hesburgh and former delegate to the U.N. Special Session on Disarmament Marjorie Benton, this group hopes to rally public support. According to one close SALT observer, "Americans for SALT will probably try to have key people in key states write letters as opposed to the anti-SALT tactic of simply trying to swamp their senators." Illustrating how fearful some pro-SALT people are, Americans for SALT was supposed to begin only after a treaty was signed. But seeing the growth of the opposition it opened its offices in January. Even though current polls show that 80 percent of the American people favor a Treaty, polls also show that the support is shallow. As a result, Americans for SALT (like the others) realize that campaigns and advertising may make an enormous difference.

All of this is not to say that the actual substance of the treaty will not have a great deal of bearing on whether it passes. Many grave questions will be debated: whether Russian ICBMs not in silos are to be limited; whether we have the technology to verify their commitments; whether the Carter administration is making too many compromises so that a treaty will only be the introduction to increased military expenditures. All of these are completely valid questions. But one gets the impression that after all the expert testimony has been heard, the ultimate factor in the deliberations of the U.S. Senate will be politics. That reality is now quite well understood in Washington.

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The state of American fiction

ALL IN THE FAMILY

JONATHAN YARDLEY

AT NO TIME in the fifteen years I've been reviewing books professionally has American fiction been as healthy, lively and *consequential* as it is right now. Writers of all ages, stations, slants and styles are bringing forth novels and short stories in startling profusion—and this is work of quality and serious purpose, over and above the commercial fiction with which the marketplace has always been littered. To a remarkable degree, furthermore, these writers are preoccupied with variations upon a single theme: familial and domestic life.

This is not the first time in recent months that I have mounted this particular soapbox, and I concede the possibility that my infatuation with it has clouded my critical judgment. Yet the evidence is there. From John Cheever to David Plante, from Eudora Welty to Robert Kotlowitz, from John Irving to Thomas Savage, from Larry McMurtry to Larry Woiwode, from John Updike to Toni Morrison, from Peter Taylor to Maria Katzenbach—writers who otherwise have little in common except the seriousness of their work have turned their attentions to family situations. The family being an institution of infinite possibilities, it isn't surprising that these writers approach it from many and sometimes sharply divergent angles; what *is* surprising is that they approach it at all.

That's because from the early '60s well into the '70s our sociologists and our novelists were trying to tell us that the family was dead. The sociologists trotted out statistics about the rising divorce rate and the declining birth rate; the novelists—at least a great many of those taken seriously in literary circles—threw aside the family and concentrated on the individual, usually the brooding individual flagellating himself with contemporary angst and anomie.

To say that in the last few years there has been a conscious, organized reaction against the inwardness and self-absorption of '60s fiction would be preposterous; writers don't work in movements. The revival of interest in the family—and the concomitant revival of more traditional modes of storytelling—defies any explanation, or at least any that I've been able to come up with. The most that can safely and accurately be said is that a large number of writers, working quite independently of each other, have arrived at the same place.

From their labors we have received five books of lasting value and importance: Cheever's *Stories* (Knopf), Irving's *The World According to Garp* (Dutton/Robbins), Taylor's *Collected Stories* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), Welty's *Losing Battles* (Random House) and Woiwode's *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Three of these—the Cheever, Irving and Welty—have been widely read and discussed and can profit from no further discussion here. But a few words on Taylor and Woiwode are necessary.

A good case can be made that Taylor is the greatest living American writer of the short story; but unless you are a Cheever, with the commercial success of your novels to bring readers to your stories, you are fated these days to a small readership indeed. That has been Taylor's fate, one compounded by the hostility and incomprehension with which Northern reviewers have greeted his tales of upper-middle-class domestic life in Memphis and Nashville. Yet these stories—almost all of which deal with the ties that bind, even if painfully—are simply unmatched for subtlety, resonance, wisdom and sheer elegance of prose.

As for *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*, it is an unabashedly old-fashioned novel that appeared (in 1975) just before critics were beginning to have second thoughts about the avant-garde, and thus was widely misunderstood. Though it can be argued that the novel is a bit too long for its own good, Woiwode's errors are those of ambition and expansiveness rather than caution and timidity. He is not afraid of emotion (the same can be said of Irving) and he is not afraid to insist that the reader feel it with him; in fact he forces the reader to, in a number of scenes of absolutely withering power. For what little it is worth, Woiwode's novel and Taylor's stories are the two American works of fiction of the past decade that I'd take with me to the proverbial desert island.

But there are others, some of which seem to have found almost no readership at all, that treat family matters with

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sensitivity, imagination and skill. Thomas Savage's *I Heard My Sister Call My Name* (Little, Brown) is the story of a middle-aged woman who finds the family she never knew she had. David Galloway's *A Family Album* (Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich) employs highly experimental photographic techniques to recreate a family's history through its snapshot albums. Special mention should be made of David Plante's *The Family*, which describes the gradual dissolution of a Providence working-class family in spare, monochromatic prose that is deliberately as bleak as its subject.

The list-making could go on for a long time: Updike's *Couples* (Knopf), McMurtry's *Terms of Endearment* (Simon and Schuster), Katzenbach's *The Grab* (Morrow), Kotlowitz' *The Boardwalk* (Knopf), Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (New American Library), William Humphrey's *The Ordways* (Knopf), Richard Stern's *Other Men's Daughters* (Pocket Books), Philip O'Connor's *Stealing Home* (Knopf), Reynolds Price's *The Surface of Earth* (Avon), Bernard Malamud's *Dubin's Lives* (Farrar, Straus), Robert Roper's *On Spider Creek* (Simon and Schuster), Paul Theroux's *Picture Palace* (Houghton, Mifflin).

They are novels about death, estrangement, self-discovery, betrayal, divorce, loyalty, rivalry, infidelity—you name it. But they are all novels about families, and for the most part they are novels about families struggling to stay together in one form or another. There may be a moral, or at least a conclusion, to be drawn from that; I decline to do so. For me—a conservative in literature if not in politics—it is enough to say that our best writers are now writing about the best and most basic of subjects, and that they are doing so in forms and styles that are accessible and appealing to the general reader. It is quite impossible for me to say how much pleasure I take in this.

PERSONAL RELATIONS AND PUBLIC THEMES

MARTIN GREEN

WHEN I TRY to draw a map of modern American fiction, I find that the two poles are represented by Philip Roth and Thomas Pynchon. They are the two novelists who, though still young, have achieved something remarkable, and promise a lot more yet. And they are strikingly different, almost complementary and mutually exclusive, in their achievements.

Roth is our contemporary master of the fiction of personal relations, if we let that phrase stand for (as I think in literature it must stand for) all the traditional subject matter of the serious novel. In Great Tradition novels, of other countries beside England, the investigation of personal relations goes with the investigation of class relations, of social and intellectual determinants, of moral values, and a severe autobiographical truthfulness. "Personal relations" means everything that bears on identity, in its social as well as its individual dimensions.

Roth writes wonderfully well within that sphere of interest and subject-matter; not only devising plots and situations that reveal new aspects, but in his every sentence refining upon his identity by the modulations of his tone. And his values correspond to that subject-matter; values of compassion, understanding, ironic acceptance, despite the assertive and aggressive surface of his central characters.

What is to my mind most innovative about his modification of this tradition is his self-exploring acknowledgement of his predecessors, in the form of critical comments on and allusions to writers like Chekhov and Kafka. Roth is always inviting us to consider the use he has made of these writers, and even the ways he is like and unlike them; invitations that harmonize beautifully with his quite different attempts to conjure up his own fictive illusion in our minds.

He seems, as we watch him, able to do anything; and yet he is, as he reminds us, hemmed in by the limitations of "personal relations." There are many things he would like to do, many truths he would like to tell, many subjects he would like to treat, which because he is a traditional novelist he cannot handle.

In *My Life As A Man*, for instance, the hero goes with his brother and nephews to hear Martin Luther King speak. They are all deeply impressed, but on the way back he says "Maybe I could hire him to be my lawyer"—returning to the obsessive problems of his relations with his ex-wife. This is exactly right not only for his character but also about personal relations. But it is also shameful in its irresponsibility (his brother and nephews are politically active) and in that failure matches exactly the curve of the book's approach to such responsibility.

Pynchon, on the other hand, is not a traditional novelist in that sense. His precursors are Swift, Rabelais, Burton—writers of the books Frye calls "anatomies." His strength lies precisely in his handling of public themes; notably the threat of modern war. *Gravity's Rainbow* begins with the sentence, "A screaming came across the sky," and that motif recurs throughout the book. Immediately it refers to the V2 rockets of World War II, but ultimately, for the reader, to more modern bombs. The measure of Pynchon's achievement is that he has captured and appropriated that element of modern experiences, has built a fictional structure that can contain and employ our panic.

And if Roth can talk about literature in ways new to the traditional novel, Pynchon can talk about science and technology. His novels bridge the gap between the two cultures—which means that the general reader is conscious much of the time of the gulf beneath him, of how much he doesn't understand and can't imaginatively grasp. But there is enough one can grasp and check to give authority to the horror-fantasy..

It is not after all Pynchon's fault that we have to grasp contemporary history in horror-fantasy terms. As his admirers have pointed out, a recurrent experience in the reading of Pynchon is the discovery that what you thought was his fancy,

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wild exaggerations of his imagination, is documented fact. This sense of extension corresponds to the sense of retreat we get in reading Roth; in both the ground shifts under the reader's feet.

They are then opposites in various ways. Roth's affinities among contemporary writers are with Bellow and Updike. (Updike's last novel seems to be an attempt to escape the limitations of the traditional novel by jumping into satire; Roth tried a similar escape in *The Great American Novel*.) Pynchon's affinities are with Barth and Mailer. (Mailer's attempts to deal with science and technology imaginatively have been in non-fiction.)

Their audiences tend to be middlebrow in Roth's case, highbrow in Pynchon's. There is, I believe, an MLA group devoted to explicating Pynchon; he offers a lot more to explicate, of course. Related to this is Roth's English literature provenance. What he knows is literature—plus the striking ways real life is different—and the ways he knows it is literary. Pynchon, like Mailer, took writing courses rather than literary ones, and majored in science. This gives them an extra range; but their recoil from literature burdens their writing with angry, exaggerated, self-falsifying gestures at times.

Of course they are also similar. A visitor from Mars might well decide that all their books were written by the same man. They are both very obscene; like most writers today, they feel driven to explore new areas of sexual experience, and their angst drives them also to make that experience disgusting and

horrifying. In Roth's case this disgust returns upon himself, because he is always self-oriented. In *The Professor of Desire* the hero involuntarily profanes his idol Kafka by an obscene fantasy. In Pynchon's case, the disgust is a generalized indictment.

Their weaknesses are complementary, too, Pynchon, for instance, does not convince me, fictionally. Though I have read *Gravity's Rainbow* through more than once, deeply impressed, I have never felt each page justify itself as I read; I could never relax the pressure of my will upon my imagination, because it never took fire and began to run in rhythm with Pynchon's. To put it more objectively, I'm always aware of fictional gaps and crudities; like the willful absence of the author, like the unpleasant Slothrop (the hero of *Gravity's Rainbow*) who demands a sympathetic identification he does not deserve, and like the Ivy League fraternity-intellectual character to Pynchon's imagination. Every person and event is conceived in those terms, and using the conventions of caricature rather than those of portrait can only temporarily disguise those limitations. In other words, Pynchon needs more of the traditional novel's skills than he has.

In Roth's case the weakness is the lack of scope, the reduction of everything outside his "personal relations" to the status of "material for fiction." The intensities of meaning are all personal, and to reach them we must follow him in inward-turning cycles of self-punishment. Of course Roth can use this weakness too as a source of meaning; he not only knows what his critics will say but can build that criticism into his self-scrutiny. But after one has applauded this grace, the fact remains that the imaginative experience is in this way limited.

But still we have two beautiful talents, producing really impressive novels, and we should be grateful for that.

BETWEEN THE GROVES AND THE BEST-SELLERS

GEORGE W. HUNT

THERE ARE at least three avenues for approaching a discussion of contemporary fiction and, though their destinations are different, in a curious way these avenues do converge. One avenue is that of the Best Seller list. Occasionally, excellent novels do grace this list, prompting good cheer among editors and educators and staving off intellectual despair. However, the bulk of these offerings year in and year out are not what the British would call a "good read" but are something distinctively American. The term "escape literature" is also a misnomer, for it appears that our capitalist hearts beat even in an easy chair or a hammock. Most of these fictional offerings are disguised "How to" books (including our soft-core pornography) in that instruction and accumulation of knowledge *about* people and things and not the feeling *for* people and things are paramount. How does Las Vegas operate? Or a public utility or an airline? Read Mario Puzo and Arthur Hailey. No lingering over linguistic niceties here; just the facts, Ma'am, something useful, storable, tradeable, a supermarket for the mind.

Akin to this pragmatic impulse is an American resistance to the imaginative world of fantasy in its purest sense. At first Tolkien's renewed popularity appears to contradict this, but here one senses more a nostalgia for collegiate memories, for languid spring days on campus grass under oak trees, than for reading pleasure. Americans seem to prefer their fantasies disguised as realism, a hybrid of scanty invention and evidently sweaty research. Herman Wouk has the formula; so too does James Michener and, a considerable step below them, so too Rosemary Rogers, Sidney Sheldon and Leon Uris. This kind of fiction is an uncloseted *roman à clef,* who's for the hammock historian or the trivia expert. What Melville called the "shock of recognition" that great fiction offers is transposed into the "satisfaction of recognition." In great fiction we always catch astonishing glimpses of ourselves. In this popular fiction, like autograph hounds, we catch glimpses of others instead: historical personages in the Wouk-Michener pageants; a recognizable rogues gallery of those bitten by the bitch goddess Success in the Rogers-Sheldon offerings.

The opposite avenue of approach wends its way through the

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Groves of Academe and into the library. Here the American instincts for realism and pragmatism are scorned. Even a cursory investigation of our better academic journals reveals who the reigning academic darlings of American fiction are: Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, William Gass, John Hawkes, Robert Coover, and Donald Barthelme. That few literate Americans have heard of some of these names, much less read their fiction, is, one suspects, also part of their charm for academics. True, each of these novelists has produced at least one exceptionally fine work (Barth several), but then again, so too have a good number of contemporary novelists. Why, then, this darling status, that of one sequestered and overly ravished in the ivory tower? One reason (as Gore Vidal has pointed out) is that most of them are teachers themselves or run university workshops, and so their pronouncements on fiction elicit a respect and reverence not accorded non-academically affiliated writers.

But the more telling reason is that their works conform best to the reigning critical ideological grid. That grid goes by various names: Post-Modernism, Meta-fiction, Surfiction, Fabulation. No matter what it is called, the meaning of "post-modernism" is clear. Beginning in the early 1960s, writers and critics of fiction began to despair of the realistic possibilities of the novel, of its potential engagement with historical and moral and social questions—so characteristic of the modernist novel—and, instead, turned inward to investigate fiction *qua* fiction. The modernist D. H. Lawrence had called the novel "the bright book of life," implying that it provided a window on reality and reached the deepest of life experiences. Such Lawrentian optimism was now called into question and, for the post-modernist, the fact the bright book was itself artificial and an imaginative construct of "life" came to the forefront of attention.

Like the chicken and the egg, it is difficult in retrospect to distinguish whether the post-modern critics discovered their darlings or the darlings submitted to their beguilements. What is evident is that a new kind of criticism with a different vocabulary and perspective and a new kind of fiction became academically popular. Borrowing freely from European formalist and structuralist models as did these writers, critics began asking questions of a formal and epistemological and technical kind about fiction. In turn, the novelists we mentioned created deliberately self-conscious novels, novels that flaunted their artificiality and emphasized their fictiveness. Traditional "realistic" devices such as plot, character and causal continuity stood exposed either through obvious parody or through the explicit renouncement of these conventions.

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The canons of fictional "truth," i.e. the reader's legitimate expectations regarding the narration's reliability, were now exploited in reverse: narrators revealed they were not reliable; the text itself was suspect; and we readers were alerted that all stories are arbitrary and made up.

In the early 1970s when these post-modern authors were at the height of their popularity (especially their less gifted *confrères* like Vonnegut and Brautigan), John Leonard expressed doubt about whether these blessed would inherit the new literary earth. And he made the observation: "With the exception of Nabokov, there is something febrile about their produce, a parodistic element that turns the book back on its author and consumes him, an irony so hyper-developed it becomes a form of suicide."

I find this assessment prophetic. As Kierkegaard once said, "Irony is an abnormal growth; like the abnormally enlarged liver of the Strausbourg goose it ends by killing the individual." Except for Barthelme, none of these academic favorites has published any fiction of consequence in several years. The recent efforts of Coover's *The Public Burning* (Viking) on the Rosenbergs and Heller's *Good As Gold* (Simon & Schuster) on Heller (once again) were, despite flashes of brilliance, sophomoric exercises, airless, and as heavy in irony as that goose's liver.

Is there, then, a third avenue, somewhere between the Groves and the Best Sellers? I suggest there is and that it is found right under our noses, in the better novels published in the last three or four years. Since 1975 each of our finest contemporaries—in this pantheon I place Bellow, Updike, Cheever and Malamud—has published an excellent novel, one that is rich and resourceful and reflects a new departure in their work. Those a notch below—Walker Percy, Toni Morrison, Wilfrid Sheed, Ann Tyler, John Irving, Peter Yates, John Gardner—have also contributed outstanding fiction. The American novel, a fabulous invalid like Broadway, now appears disconcertingly robust; in fact, these late 1970s might possibly be its numerically richest and most versatile era.

What has happened? Here the answers are many and complex. For one thing, after the upheavals of Vietnam and Watergate, another change is taking place in American culture, a period of assimilation and review, and the bright books of life reflect this. The ironic stance is still in the fictional forefront but it is of a gentler, more mature kind, as suspicious of facile cynicisms as of pollyannaisms. The national mood of the 1960s and early 1970s reflected our faltering liberal and historical hopes: both the old and the New Frontiers were closed; the innocent American Adam had bitten the apple of discord; and our dreams of inevitable progress were exposed as dreams. Post-modern novelists were especially adept at dramatizing this despair and that of the sensitive American's alienation from America's old image of itself, and they did so by pointing up the sheer craziness of life, the cracked mirror of human hopes. The news on the homefront was grim indeed and small wonder, then, that many novelists, messengers of bad news, steeled themselves for execution by asserting "all is fiction anyway," even the news and even the bearer.

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Our national crisis of confidence is not over, of course; instead, it is moving into a new and, perhaps, more precarious phase. So our late 1970s novelists are not optimistic but they have turned outward once again and no longer refrain from reporting what Richard Locke has dubbed "the secular news." Locke's phrase, in contradistinction to the parochial preoccupations of the post-modernists, refers to a novelist's concern with facticity, with the rhetoric and reality of social change, with moral and spiritual questions—in short, with what Henry James called "felt life." This turn outward, however, is not a return to an outdated nineteenth century realism nor is it counterfeit journalism. Our contemporary novelists continue to tap all the post-modernist resources like parody, myth, the absurd, comedy, multiple narrative perspectives and so on, but they are also engaged with the world and not just with the writing. Unlike much of the continental European tradition with its emphasis on ideology, the middle avenue between the demands of Realism and Art, between the Best Sellers and the Groves, is a peculiarly American tradition. In a distinctively modern fashion our recent better novels mark a return to that precarious path trod by Melville and Hawthorne, Twain and James, and later by Hemingway, Faulkner and Fitzgerald. If you do not believe any of this, then read John Updike's *The Coup*. It is at once about Africa, about America, about the art of fiction-making; and, best of all, it is about the human heart in conflict with itself.

THE DEBATE SHIFTS TO THE MORAL QUESTION

Fiction vs. anti-fiction revisited

JANET GROTH

MOST OF our familiar novelists have operated—and many still do—out of a consciousness that, though their medium may be artificial, they are dealing with the material of reality. Dickens, for example, once modified a character in one of his serially-published works when word reached him that the character—a stony-hearted midget—was causing pain and distress to a real midget, resident in the Midlands, and much beloved. About twenty years ago, with the advent of Pynchon and Borges, among others, some writers of fiction began to turn inward and to evince an ever-greater consciousness that the thing they were producing was a product of the imagination: an object made of words. The new insistence upon viewing the novel as artifact proved so inimical to the traditional processes of reading and writing fiction that the productions of the modern school came to be identified as anti-fiction.

What is the nature of fiction/anti-fiction? What, if any, is its moral content? Last October, a Fiction Festival held at the University of Cincinnati (in joint sponsorship with the National Endowment for the Arts) brought Gass and Gardner together to debate the matter, an event that was followed a few days later by a discussion between two major practitioners of the anti-fiction novel: John Barth and John Hawkes. What emerged was a demonstration that, whatever its explicit content, a significant shaping factor in virtually all contemporary fiction is the author's position on those questions. (Transcripts of both discussions, edited by Thomas LeClair, a teacher of English at the University of Cincinnati, are now in print. The Gass-Gardner debate appeared in *The New Republic*, March 10, the Barth-Hawkes comments in *The New York Times Book Review*, April 1, 1979.)

With the publication last year of John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction*, which argues the superiority of the traditional view, and of William Gass's *The World Within the Word*, which argues a self-contained fictional world, the lines of this no-longer-new debate became redrawn and took on new life. Gardner introduced the element of morality into the discussion, charging the writers of anti-fiction with a want of moral seriousness—a proposition Gass firmly rejects.

The matter seems worth reviewing here because, in spite of a considerable vogue for anti-fiction among intellectuals, there is still a burden of misunderstanding about its nature which afflicts large portions of the reading public. Many pay the anti-fiction novel lip service, may purchase—and even read—an anti-fiction work, but in their heart of hearts cannot get past its often repellent content and textual difficulty to actually like it. The opportunity of hearing first-hand from several anti-fiction writers who spoke about the philosophical and ethical bases of their work relieved that burden for many who attended the festival, A resumè of their positions may prove similarly enlightening here.

To state the two views in the briefest way possible will necessarily be crude and inadequate; one can only hope to be equally so to both.

If we look at fiction as John Gardner does—and as most of the great novelists of the 19th century did—as a representation of the real world, then our concern with it is properly a moral one. We look

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upon it as a dramatic forum in which philosophical questions are explored by means of characters who live them out in an exemplary way. We look to it to find out how to live. We care, naturally, that it should be beautiful; but we are vitally concerned that it be good and true, and we hold the author responsible for presenting us with a vision of life the acquaintance with which—whether tragic or comic—we may feel as salutary.

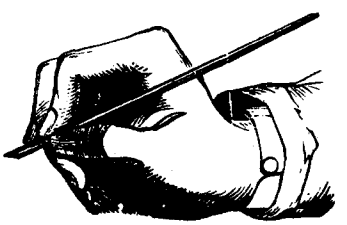
If, on the other hand, we look at fiction as William Gass does—and as many of the best post-Joycean novelists, including Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov do—as a made thing, the only difference between it and any other made thing being its materials, which are linguistic instead of mortar or brick, then our concern with it is properly an aesthetic one. We no longer consider the questions of truth and goodness with regard to it, but wish to know only one thing: is it beautiful? Far from looking to the work for any philosophical guidelines on how to live or expecting it to supply us with a sense of affirmation of life, we view it as a linguistic construct. Gass says in his exchange with Gardner "John wants a message, some kind of communication to the world. I want to plant some object in the world. Now it happens to be made of signs, which may lead people to think . . . that it's pointing somewhere. But actually I've gone down the road and collected all sorts of highway signs and made a piece of sculpture out of these things that says Chicago, 35,000 miles. What I hope, of course, is that people will come along, gather in front of the sculpture, and just look at it—consequently forgetting Chicago."

ONE OF THE thorniest problems posed by the anti-fiction school of writing is just this insistence on no message. It is what Gass means when he speaks of attempting to disarm "the almost insistent communicability of language."

But there *is* content in anti-fiction, and it is often very harsh. John Hawkes regularly undertakes to render suicide, adultery and various forms of sexual depravity involving children in an aesthetically pleasing light. As George P. Elliot describes it in *The American Scholar* (Spring/Summer, 1978) "Anti-fiction may include a story, but will fracture it. . . . It forbids, ignores, or frustrates the reader's usual sympathies or antipathies. . . ."

Is such an approach merely perverse? Is it, as Gardner suggests, immoral? One of the first revelations of the fiction festival came early in the Gass-Gardner debate with the discovery that Gardner's charge against Gass (and the other writers of anti-fiction) of a want of moral seriousness wouldn't hold up. In their very first exchange Gass readily acknowledged that of course, "moral issues surround us everywhere," agreed that "they are deeply important" but questioned "whether or not writing fiction, rather than, for instance, doing philosophy, is a good method" for exploring them.

The contributions of Gass, Hawkes, and Barth to the two fiction festival panels make it clear that what separates their work from the realist tradition Gardner is identifying as "moral" is not the presence or absence of moral seriousness (moral views) in them as authors, but rather the presence or absence in them of a system of belief(s)—almost any system, from orthodox religion to a minimal humanistic belief in the possibility of meaning. The presence of some such belief makes possible to the writer of traditional fiction a whole series of stylistic and interpretive assumptions which are unavailable to the writer of anti-fiction, not because he has no moral sense but because, as Gass put it, "I don't know, most of the time, what I believe." And, as Hawkes said of writers in the traditional form, "such writers think they are reflecting or reproducing reality. They must think they know what reality is; they must think that 'out there' is reality, which I don't think at all." To judge from statement after statement in this vein, the absence of the moral fiction Gardner regrets and finds missing from



so many of today's most gifted writers would seem to be a matter not of the want of morals (all participants in the festival were reassuringly free of cloven hooves) but rather the result of a swing of the modern psyche from a natural condition of faith to one of radical existential doubt. At the fulcrum point of this swing is the Logos, the divine principle which bears within its garments of language the treasure of meaning. To approach this treasure from the perspective of faith is to be able to construct whole systems of morality and belief and—in ultimate terms—to create a coherent universe; to approach it from the perspective of doubt is to find in it a multitude of discrete sounds signifying nothing, out of which the best one can hope to make is, as Gass has noted, a linguistic construct that can qualify as a beautiful object.

Before we find these writers in the anti-fiction mode wanting in either moral seriousness or moral courage it might be well to consider what John Hawkes has to say on the subject of risk: ". . . at least in certain writers, comedy is too comforting. Nobody can truly suffer or be truly obscene in Saul Bellow's work, for example, because he has a humane comic vision. Perhaps his vision is sustaining. But for me everything is dangerous, everything is tentative, nothing is certain. I think the writing of fiction involves enormous anxiety and enormous risk. And I want fiction always to situate us in the psychic and literal spot where life is most difficult, most dangerous, most beautiful. . . ." We might look too, at his tribute to his fellow novelist: "For me John Barth's fiction has the enormous power it does because it is always positing nothingess, because it is so 'created' that it also insists on that which is vacant . . . [Barth] always make us aware of what we are most afraid of, which is nothingness."

But what, if any, is the moral content of this willingness to embrace risk, to encounter nothingness? Paul Tillich has defined it as the "courage to be." In his chapter on "Nonbeing opening up being" Tillich says: "In our discussion of courage and life we have mentioned the dynamic understanding of reality by the philosophers of life. Such an understand-

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ing is possible only if one accepts the view that non-being belongs to being, that being could not be the ground of life without non-being . . . non-being drives being out of its seclusion, it forces it to affirm itself dynamically." Tillich goes on to assert that philosophy has dealt with this dynamic in Hegel and the Neoplatonists, and that theology has done so whenever it took the idea of a living God seriously, notably in the idea of trinity. He might well have been moved to add that literature does so in the form of anti-fiction.

IMMEDIATELY we understand that dynamic and accept the efficacy of dialectically opposing what is and what is not, we pass through the looking glass and find a kind of entrée into the world of anti-fiction that stubbornly resists penetration by ordinary fictional—and moral—standards. The vision on the other side is seen to be not moral, immoral, or amoral so much an anti-moral. If there is to be any moral insight here, this vision says, it must be supplied by you, the reader.

The *sine qua non* of literary appreciation on this side of the glass is no longer the Coleridgeian "willing suspension of disbelief," so serviceable to us on the other side. Gass give us our cue when he says"as a fiction writer I find it convenient not to believe things." The implication is that we, as fiction readers, will too. But Gass goes on, "Not to disbelieve things either, just to move into a realm where everything is held in suspension." In other words, a willing suspension of all beliefs.

Of course, all of this means little without the literary art it is designed to be in aid of. Armed with our new dictum, let us go on to look briefly at the readings the authors gave at the festival from their own works. William Gass read a section called "The Tunnel" from his new novel. In it, we follow the interior states of an academic couple who are forced to live in close proximity to a couple of their peers, in a two-family dwelling that sports extremely thin walls. At first the couple listens with malicious glee to the sounds of living issuing from next door. But, gradually their mocking contempt changes as it is borne in upon them that their own intimate acts in bedroom, bathroom and kitchen are likewise being instantly and noisily communicated to the couple on the other side. They become increasingly and progressively inhibited until, finally, they break down completely in a state that seems to be a combination of acute paranoia and virtually paralyzing self-consciousness.

John Hawkes, after cheerfully describing the heroine of his new novel as "the depraved matron of a home for disturbed adolescents," read us a quite indescribable passage from it. All that can be said of it is that it involves the moon, the matron, a young boy, and an atmosphere of pleasurable dread. Later, Hawkes expressed his hope that in this book, once and for all "innocence would be burned at the stake."

Stanley Elkin, another major figure identified with the anti-fiction novel, did not participate in a panel, but he appeared at the festival to read a section of his new novel, *The Conventional Wisdom*. In it, a Jewish liquor-store owner from Minneapolis is sent to his reward by a couple of gun-toting heroin addicts in the course of a robbery designed to yield funds for the support of their habit. Computer error sends the proprietor to the wrong reward but, by virtue of sheer annoyance power, his complaint from the lower regions of hell succeeds in getting him a hearing and an eventual transfer to heaven. By this time it has become clear, however, that the fellow is a chronic malcontent; he goes on stirring up the populace until God himself is forced to stand trial in order to shut everybody up. Elkin, having rung a series of brilliant changes on Dante, Milton, the Bible, and George Bernard Shaw, winds up with pure Yiddish theater. God, in an artistic—and cosmic—fit of pique blows everybody to smithereens "because I could never find my audience."

BARTH introduced a selection from his new work entitled *Letters* as an attempt to resuscitate a literary form—the epistolary novel—hitherto supposed to have been exhausted in the 18th century. His reading consisted of letters which figures from one of his earlier novels write to one another describing kaleidoscopic (and quite unsummarizable) carryings-on on the banks of Baltimore's river.

For those to whom the festival discussions had granted a new vantage point, these anti-fiction readings attained a strange power. What had seemed mere perversity began to feel like the salutary destruction of preconceived ideas; what had presented itself to us as morally reprehensible began to take on an enjoyable participatory cast of morality-by-inference; when exposed to something dislocating or frustrating in the text we could begin to feel about it something of what John Barth says he feels when he reads John Hawkes: "They wear me out, Hawkes's books; they hurt my head. They provoke though, the kind of love that one feels only for amazing things that could not come out of one's own imagination at all. One loves them the more for that fact."

Standing like grace notes in the early days of the festival were the readings of Tillie Olsen and John Gardner from their own fiction, written in traditional form. Not strictly germane to the discussion of anti-fiction which dominated the event, these works and the presence of Olsen and Gardner at the Festival nevertheless provided a valuable comment on the debate.

Large audiences attended all the readings and seemed equally receptive at each of them. One was reminded that words, next to children, are the most exciting, dangerous and delightful adult playthings conceivable. It was a little like a trip to outer space, where from the vantage point of the weightless, all-but-contentless beauty of the moon, our familiar planet, earth, took on contours mysterious and new. It began to seem possible that whatever direction fiction should take in the future, the presence on the contemporary scene of anti-fiction writers and the work they do—shimmering over, shattering, reflecting, challenging, borrowing, and, in general, refreshing the literature of both past and present—sets up a tension, charges the literary atmosphere in such a way that all readers and writers benefit.

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Television

WHY NO D.C. ON TV

EVERY WASHINGTON SERIES FAILS

NORMAN LEAR recently had the idea of producing a series about a black congressman, and when the Congressional Black Caucus recoiled in horror from the pilot, he unceremoniously yanked it from its place in the schedule. CBS has now been left with a blank space in its Sunday programming, and Lear and his associates have carried out some unaccustomed soul-searching in the public print. Where did we go wrong, they have plaintively asked. They could easily have spared themselves much socio-political agony if they had borne in mind some simple truths about television.

It all has to do with role models. "Role model" is a quaint American concept of the late 20th century where it is believed that children form unshakable and sometimes damaging impressions about their fellow man from the characters they encounter in books, on the screen, and in everyday life. For example, my mother is a lawyer, and so if the producers of "Perry Mason" had not cleverly cast Raymond Burr in the title role when I was at an impressionable age, I might today find it difficult to accept the notion that men can be lawyers, too.

The Congressional Black Caucus, predictably enough, objected that "Mister Dugan" (the ill-fated series) did not project a positive role model of a black congressman. What is a positive role model? It can be safely assumed they didn't have one of their own members, convicted felon Rep. Charles Diggs (D-Mich.) in mind, but someone more closely resembling their own perception of themselves. They would have been happy if Norman Lear had contrived a casual combination of Reggie Jackson, George Washington Carver, and Ralph Bunche, who was not only wise, handsome, honest, brave, clean and reverent, but side-splitting as well, since "Mister Dugan" was supposed to be a comedy. What the Caucus was unwilling to admit, and what Lear seems not to know, is that everyone is aggrieved by television, regardless of race, creed, national origin or whatever. It is a presumption that television can do nothing to dislodge, and a problem that awkward remedies like "Mister Dugan" leave intractable. For every Florence Nightingale, after all, there is a Lizzie Borden, and, unhappily, no division of the population is immune from its own knaves and fools.

What is curious is that it should still be thought that television or movie roles make any difference. Norman Lear, and the Black Caucus for that matter, seem genuinely to believe that they are capable of making social history, or are tampering with the psyches of a generation. When William Powell played a buffoon in "The Senator Was Indiscreet" how many young white boys were thereafter discouraged from becoming senators? What sort of role model did Lana Turner ever provide, or William Bendix, or, as of late, Norman Lear's own creations, Carroll O'Connor, Louise Lasser, Jimmie (J.J.) Walker? No, it is all a matter of self-indulgence, and, to an extent, a dishonest refusal to look at things as they are. The doyens of role modeling would have television eliminate all human characteristics, a scheme, sad to say, undoubtedly under discussion right now at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Television has recently joined those other national institutions determined to know what's good for us.

Which leaves a further, practical point, and that is that television has never carried off a successful series about Washington, which should have deterred Lear in the first place. Why this is I am not prepared to say, but the record is abundantly clear. Every few years a series comes along, and every few years it disappears just as quickly: they have been funny and dramatic, high-minded and mindless, dealing with Washington from every conceivable angle. All have failed. I suspect the answer lies partly in a sort of unconscious hostility that most Americans have toward "Washington" and which prevents them from being much enchanted by its goings-on. It is certainly true that Washingtonians find it difficult at times, and so it is not surprising that the inhabitants of televisionland should prefer to be entertained elsewhere.

Furthermore, no producer has ever fully grasped what Washington is about, and it may be impossible. The programs have run the gamut in that respect: the shows are either heavy-handed, with habitual solemn-voiced references to "the President" and contrived dialogue about the Constitution, or light-hearted situation comedies that only incidentally happen to take place in the capital. From the first category, "Grandpa Goes to Washington" came and went this past season, with Jack Albertson as a suffocatingly honest, irascible old porcupine, whom one soon grew to loathe. In the past there have been Karen Valentine as a young Nader Raider, Inger Stevens as a young congressman's assistant, Hal Holbrook as a tough, committed young senator. Perhaps youth is the problem; Washington is a temperamentally middle-aged city, and transplanting sun-bleached Californians to the capital of the free world somehow doesn't work.

It was that self-contained paradox that doomed "Mister Dugan." An interesting book was published recently entitled *The View From Sunset Boulevard* by Ben Stein, a television writer who contends, from a self-confessed right-wing point of view, that television characters inhabit a fantastic world concocted and nourished by an incestuous crowd of Hollywood producers and writers. He may well be right; in the case of Norman Lear he certainly is. Lear has been so many times congratulated for his comedies of class warfare that he has undoubtedly begun to believe the things that are said about him. In his role as television statesman he sought to give to the world a Hollywood black congressman, and found himself face to face with the equally fanciful notions of the Congressional Black Caucus, and political sociology of the thickest sort. In this instance Lear wavered and ran, and a blow was

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struck for our own national version of Socialist Realism. It remains somehow to be proven that "All the world's a stage . . . And one man in his time plays many parts."

PHILIP TERZIAN

Screen

MISSING MISS CHRISTIE

NOT WHODUNNIT? BUT WHO WAS SHE?

As AGATHA (Vanessa Redgrave) is about to attempt a shot, Wally Stanton (Dustin Hoffman) enters the snooker room. He is an American journalist who has traced her to this resort hotel where she is, among other things, playing snooker with strangers under an assumed name. She is of course Agatha Christie, the most famous mystery writer in the world, who has mysteriously disappeared some days earlier after a car crash near her home. As she addresses the ball, Stanton walks over and, without benefit of introduction, whispers in her ear. She hesitates. He whispers something further, over the objections of one of the other players. Smiling ever so slightly, she re-addresses the ball. Stanton discreetly pulls the elegant shawl she wears with her evening dress off her shoulders. He does this to disencumber her arms, which she now holds as if they were embarrassed to be caught naked.

He steps around to the adjacent side of the table and places the chalk on the bumper for her to aim at. She then strokes the ball with such abruptness and ferocity that we fear for a moment she may end sprawled on the table. Certainly she must have taken a divot out of the felt. And she has obviously missed the shot, which was at a slight angle to the corner pocket but looked, nonetheless, direct. As the ball caroms off the bumper and goes wandering crazily up toward the other end of the table, the other players are too taken aback to say anything. But then, to the even greater amazement of us all, the ball comes ambling down the table again, taking its own sweet time, and arrives back at the corner pocket with just the right amount of momentum to drop neatly in.

The course described by that snooker ball is very like the plot of one of Agatha Christie's own mysteries, and very like the plot of this movie as well. In a flight of pure fancy, *Agatha* turns something that actually happened in Dame Christie's life—her unexplained disappearance for a number of days in 1926—into a story she herself might have written. Like one of her own mysteries, *Agatha* begins with a bump, with an unexpected lurch, a violent breach in the decorum of upper-class English life. Having discovered that her husband Archibald (Timothy Dalton) is philandering with his secretary, Agatha confronts him at the breakfast table and is told she is to be thrown over. Distraught, she leaves home in her car that night, but crashes into a tree nearby. The next thing we know, she is on a train somewhere and the police are dragging a marsh close to the wrecked and abandoned automobile.

Thus the deed is done, the mystery in need of solving uncovered. In the world which Agatha Christie's own characters inhabit, murder is a crime not because it breaks the law—we almost always feel the victim deserves to have been done in—but because it is the sort of thing that embarrasses one in front of the servants. *Agatha*'s director Michael Apted and writers Kathleen Tynan and Arthur Hopcraft carefully surround Agatha's break with her husband in the movie with much the same atmosphere. Just as Agatha goes completely to pieces and falls to the floor clutching Archie's legs, a servant enters carrying the breakfast tea. "Get out," yells Archie, slamming the dining room door with one hand while trying to pull Agatha to her feet with the other. The commotion of this scene followed by the car crash starts *Agatha* on its way with the same, smart jolt that its central character delivers to her snooker ball.

And like the snooker ball, the plot of the movie seems to rebound from this violent beginning and roll off vaguely as if Agatha were bungling her life. The way she goes to that resort, she seems to be in a daze. But then the plot begins to double back toward the corner pocket again when we learn it was in this very resort that Archie planned to spend the weekend with his secretary, who is now to come without him. Once Agatha discovers that the secretary is there, she begins to hatch a plot of her own. She is not to be the victim in this mystery after all, it seems. We watch with pleasurable incredulity as the plot follows a route as circuitous as any Dame Christie herself might have concocted, and then drops surprisingly into the corner pocket.

Every good Agatha Christie ends with a twist, and this one is no exception. The clues are in the direction, though, more than the writing. The cameraman on *Agatha* is Vittorio Storaro, who has done all of Bertolucci's films. Storaro is distinctive for his ability to work in very low natural light and to achieve the effects of "Rembrandt" lighting with color film stock. This is what he does here, imparting a lush romanticism to the many mist-filtered, window-lit scenes in *Agatha*. After all, Christie's own writing is part of the romance of the 1920s. Her novels today are period pieces, enjoyable for their quaintness as much as their suspense. If Apted is trying to turn her life into one of her own mysteries, it's only fitting he should give it the right atmosphere. But Apted has a further motive which doesn't become apparent until the very end of the film. The one moment in the film which isn't lit in the characteristic Storaro manner is the one when the ball drops in the corner pocket, the twist which suddenly causes the whole, convoluted plot to make sense. Apted has retained Storaro's Rembrandt light up until that moment so that the harsh, white arc light of the moment itself will have—to use the appropriate metaphor—shock value.

The mystery that *Agatha* is trying to solve is of course not Whodunnit?, but rather, Who was she, this famous yet elusive woman—what was she really like? We are used to sympathizing with the murderer and disliking the victim in a Christie story, but *Agatha* makes it a bit more complicated than that

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because Agatha herself is both the victim and the "criminal"—first the one, then the other—and we sympathize with her in both roles. Thus *Agatha* becomes the one thing an Agatha Christie story never is: a character study. Dame Christie was perhaps the greatest stereotyper in all literature. She could fix a character forever with a single detail or gesture, and for years she sustained one character—Poirot—on nothing but such superficialities. But if someone truly given to self-doubt or passion or some other genuine complexity of character had ever entered the world she created, that world, with all its charm and magic atmosphere, would have been instantly destroyed. What finally has to sustain *Agatha* beyond the inventiveness of the plot and the effects is acting, and this Vanessa Redgrave provides.

The movie's opening scene is intended to remind us of the real Agatha Christie's legendary shyness, and in subsequent scenes Ms. Redgrave translates this into an almost physical vulnerability. She plays Agatha as a woman at once both ungainly and beautiful—a woman whose ungainliness *makes* her beautiful. Ms. Redgrave keeps visible just beneath the surface of the public figure the personality of a girl who has grown too quickly and now feels rangy and awkward. She plays Agatha as the sort of woman who becomes terribly self-conscious about her knees every time she sits down because they always stick up above her lap. The characters in an Agatha Christie story are ordinarily forthright, willful and sharply defined. By contrast the Agatha in the movie seems uncertain, impulsive, at loose ends; yet she turns out to be more determined than the most single-minded murderess Dame Christie could have imagined.

What throws Ms. Redgrave's performance into relief and makes us feel its exquisiteness is the counterpoint performance by Dustin Hoffman. Where Agatha is retiring, Wally Stanton is brash. Where she is flustered or reticient, he is candid and bold. They complement each other. Their personalities fit together in a comic, human way, like the postures of a slouchy woman and a barrel-chested man on a dance floor. That Hoffman is too short for Ms. Redgrave puts her at just the disadvantage she needs to bring out Agatha's best qualities. But Hoffman's role, while it is key to the fanciful story *Agatha* tells, is still only a foil for the role of Agatha herself. It is her behavior that Tynan, Hopcraft, Storaro, Apted and, especially, Vanessa Redgrave had to imagine. Whether the result is the real Agatha Christie is impossible to say. One can only trust that the real Agatha was someone as winning as this.

COLIN L. WESTERBECK, JR.

SPEAKING LOUDLY & CARRYING A SMALL STICK

Our man at the U.N.

RICHARD C. HOTTELET

IN HIS BRIEF TIME at the UN, Daniel Patrick Moynihan was at the center of big and little storms—some of his own making. For a man of verve and originality, he, together with his assistant, Suzanne Weaver, has written a surprisingly dull book.

Too much of *A Dangerous Place* (Atlantic, Little, Brown, $12.50, 297 pp) is Moynihan quoting his articles, speeches, memoranda, the UN record, the views of friends and newspaper clippings. The effect is one of embattled, unfailing righteousness. His portrayal is a struggle of good against evil, light against darkness with overtones of Armageddon and apocalypse. Read three of four years later, it can be heavy going. Fearless and unswerving pursuit of justice becomes a public figure, but too much of it makes a man a monument.

Moynihan came to the UN in the spring of 1975, having written, toward the end of his term as Ambassador to India, a biting critique of the United States' posture in the United Nations for the magazine *Commentary*. He noted that the change in the UN membership after 1960 to a majority of newly independent states had altered attitude and practice. The new majority wanted to vote itself a redistribution of the wealth and political power held by the West and thought it could do best in association with the Soviet Union. Cheerfully applying a double standard, these countries often used the Soviet terminology of imperialism, colonialism, monopoly and exploitation to attack the West while overlooking the suppression of political freedom and human rights in the Communist camp, not to mention the Soviets' failure to provide them with any real economic help, apart from a few large, token projects.

Fuming at another in a string of resolutions which sought to brand Puerto Rico as colonial territory, to be "liberated" by the UN, Moynihan, who had been in the US delegation to the 1971 General Assembly, cabled to congratulate John Scali for vigorously opposing the new effort. He recalled "THE FURY WITH WHICH I SAT . . . AND LISTENED TO THE STALINIST SON OF A BITCH FROM CUBA GO ON ABOUT PUERTO RICO . . .". Moynihan's conclusion was, "TO HELL WITH IT. SOMETHING SPECIFICALLY BAD SHOULD HAPPEN TO EACH ONE [of the countries which vote for such resolutions or abstain] AND WHEN IT HAS HAPPENED THEY SHOULD BE TOLD THAT AMERICANS TAKE THE HONOR OF THEIR DEMOCRACY MOST SERIOUSLY. . ." In his longer, more judicious analysis, which he also sent to Secretary of State Henry Kis-

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singer, Moynihan urged that the United States not simply suffer insult, but "go into opposition." "It is time," he wrote, ". . . that the American spokesman come to be feared in international forums for the truths he might tell." The idea appealed to Kissinger. Moynihan abruptly replaced Scali.

One of the threads running through this book is a love-hate relationship with Kissinger. The Secretary, an old associate from Harvard and the early Nixon White House, is portrayed as a liar, hypocrite and intriguer, albeit of prodigious talent, who, in his last months in power, grows increasingly pessimistic and cynical about the future of Western democracy.

Kissinger was furious with his new ambassador for having dinner with Solzhenitzyn in Geneva; Moynihan was suspicious and scornful of the Secretary's pursuit of detente, holding that "the authors of detente took the position that the Soviets could be persuaded where they could no longer be forced." It is not clear that Moynihan in his time forced the Soviets to do anything, except to withdraw a minor resolution or two. He believes that he put the human rights issue on the world's agenda. What is certain is that after Watergate and Vietnam, in the year in which the Mayaguez incident could be hailed as proof that the United States still had teeth, Moynihan struck an attitude of active, flamboyant defiance which satisfied the craving of the Ford administration and of the American public for at least the appearance of success.

THE POST of United States Permanent Representative to the United nations is unique. Its main responsibility is in public diplomacy. The game requires considerable diplomatic skill because it involves 150-odd players and, while it normally produces little in the way of immediate, practical consequence it occasionally does. Even platonic resolutions can effect—or create—reality. The collapse of Portugal's African empire has been attributed in part to the General Assembly's endorsement year after year of the guerrilla war, sustaining the fighters' morale and the drain on Portugal's resources that provoked revolution at home. At the very least, what is done at the UN touches the interests of many states and requires careful consideration, followed by persuasive, effective public explanation. The American spokesman, further, has his own public and what he says cannot fail to consider the needs of domestic politics. He has, from the beginning, been a member of the President's cabinet, often a figure prominent in public life or an active politician—or both. Moynihan, who was neither, strictly speaking, when he took the job, was both when he left it nine months later.

The new Ambassador came to New York with well developed views and a chip on his shoulder. He saw a dwindling minority of democratic states under attack by a coalition of totalitarian regimes and their bought or intimidated henchmen. The leader of the forces of darkness was the Soviet Union, brutal and unscrupulous. The leader of the free world, the United States, has—at least in its elite—lost faith in its ideals. Moynihan came to revive the power of those ideals—political freedom, human rights, honesty and straightforwardness—and throw it at the hypocritical enemy.

When Luis Echeverria, then President of Mexico, wanted to mobilize the Security Council against death sentences in Spain for killing policemen, Spain recalled the shooting of Mexican students by riot police when Echeverria was Minister of Interior and also circulated the charge that he had worked for the CIA. What's wrong with working for the CIA?, asked Moynihan, adding that cabinet ministers in any number of countries have. The subject was dropped. Moynihan observes, "I commenced to be noticed."

Idi Amin came to the UN and, at the climax of a long speech, called for the extinction of Israel. Writes Moynihan "It was a time to create a crisis." And he did, denouncing Amin as a racist murderer. Unfortunately, the Ambassador overreached himself in calling it no accident that Amin was Chairman of the Organization of African Unity when, in fact, normal rotation had put him in that post. Moynihan reflected, "If you want an audience, start a fight."

A man much less hypersensitive than the author to coverage in newspapers and broadcasts would have seen the potential of his performance. The opportunity soon came to repeat it on a larger scale with a weightier issue—the notorious resolution labeling Zionism a form of racism. Moynihan smote it and its sponsors hip and thigh—the towering champion of decency. The professionals were not sure that he was not making an epic of a sordid episode which would otherwise have passed quickly to burial in the General Assembly's mountain of paper. But Moynihan argued that words are the currency of ideas and that these had to be fought. The public enthusiastically agreed, leaving no doubt in his mind that he was doing the right thing—however Kissinger and the career diplomats might squirm and sigh.

IN A REAL WAY, Moynihan was correct. It is hard to measure these things, but he was surely giving expression to public opinion. He was, in addition. letting off the steam of frustration and self-doubt which had built up in the body politic. Whatever else he might be, Pat Moynihan was no self-doubter, and to him frustration was not inner suffering but a call to arms. He may, in addition, have given many UN members a salutary shock, a reminder that there are limits to the gratuitous insult a tolerant, liberal great power is prepared to endure.

Engagingly, Moynihan quotes the *London Economist* which, when he left, thanked him for having come and for having gone when he did. His contribution was what it was because it was brief; the reasoning behind it would not have sustained a longer effort. His gloomy view of an increasingly isolated United States amid "a general assault by the majority of the nations in the world on the principles of liberal democracy which are now found only in a minority of nations" is too simple and melodramatic. The implication of concerted action against one political target is hard to square with events over any longer time span. Shifting coalitions inside subgroupings of the "majority," the Non-Aligned, the Group of 77 developing countries, the Asian and African regional organizations, the Arab League have clashed too often in recent years—over the Western Sahara, the Ogaden, Timor, Angola, Uganda,

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Indochina, not to mention Lebanon and Israel or the Law of the Sea, for such classic reasons as fear and greed—to permit history to be seen in terms of a global anti-liberal or anti-Western conspiracy. China, now taking off Mao's ideological straitjacket, is urging the West to be vigilant and strong. The struggle is certainly not over, but the Soviet Union, thrown out of Somalia and Egypt, watching the political rebirth of Portugal and Spain, embarrassed by China's defiance and as bewildered as everyone else by the forces let loose in Iran next door, can hardly think it has the West on the ropes. Furthermore, liberal democracy, a western standard which approaches political perfection and which the United States and Europe are still struggling to fulfill after centuries of evolution, cannot honestly be a worldwide yardstick. Another honorable criterion would be the rule of law based on custom, religion or ethnic patterns of justice as opposed to the whim of a tyrant or the synthetic dictate of an all-powerful party.

As regards the cookie and the whip to keep the recalcitrant in line, surely one of the sappiest notions ever advanced envisages a monthly printout of the UN voting records of countries classified as those "with whom the United States just doesn't have much business," . . . numbering almost half the UN membership. The author's point of departure is an arbitrary—and odd—distinction between United States bilateral and multilateral relations with the rest of the world. In practical diplomacy, the two aspects are not separated but interwoven, different facets of the same exercise: trying to find out what is going on and to influence it in the American interest. It is foolish to ignore either or to let the one blot out the other. Moynihan however, divides them, arguing that there are 64 nations whose importance to the United States is determined entirely by the way they vote in the UN, by their "multilateral actions." He acknowledges that from time to time bilateral relations, even with these countries, "will have moments of great saliency."

He would, however, deal with them as obstreperous children. Each month, the US ambassador would call on the foreign minister with the printout in hand. What precisely would follow is not described further. Presumably, the ambassador would give or withhold money or food or smiles or weapons according to the rated performance of the previous period. One question not answered—or even raised—is why the United States should bother with these countries at all. Another is how the United States suddenly shifts gears from first-of-the-month scoldings to an effective bilateral relationship with them when the moment of "great saliency"—An emergency, say, or the discovery of hidden wealth—transforms some desert, swamp or out of the way curiosity into a strategic factor.

ONE CENTRAL weakness in Moynihan's approach is his insistence on an ideological underpinning of U.S. foreign policy. The best brief label I can think of for this is, paradoxically enough, the Russian "partiinost"—partisanship—in the name of freedom, of course. Shades of Barry Goldwater. The author dismisses with contempt the view of a foreign service officer that the State Department should not be an ideological institution. In postulating a war of ideas which must be waged everywhere and at all times, Moynihan fails to see that the totalitarianism against which he tilts is not an ideology but a technique employed by weak regimes of the most varied stripe to stay in power. The great surviving totalitarian ideology of the 20th Century—call it Communism or Marxism-Leninism or scientific socialism or whatever—survives only as a cosmetic label for the mechanism of force and propaganda (compulsion and persuasion, Vyshinsky called it) by which ins keep themselves in, the outs out and the masses in their place. In a more general way, the author distorts the give and take of human life. Flexibility does not mean bending the immutable principles, political freedom and human dignity, that should guide a civilized policy. It means compromise in method. The perfect is the the enemy of the good. A pile driver is not an all-purpose instrument. To disagree with him does not mean to ignore that there are grave dangers and that a nation must live by immutable principles. Nor does it reflect any preference for flabby opportunism or resigned pessimism. To ideologize liberty is to diminish the force of this elemental human urge. There is no more powerful social idea, and it is strongest when it sustains and spreads itself—as, indeed, it does. Its enemies pay it lip service and try to coopt it. They do succeed in stifling and corrupting it—but never completely. Liberty, variously perceived—as it must be to be free—is the moral common denominator of many more people than live in Pat Moynihan's 29 embattled democracies. It permits wide and fruitful, if sometimes loose, combinations of interest inside and outside the United Nations.

United States adherence to the cause of liberty has maintained this country's prestige even in the face of error and dire adversity. More is needed, to be sure, like military and economic power, for a nation to defend and assert its principles, but nothing is more likely to win it genuine cooperation. The ideal might be to speak softly and carry a big stick. In Moynihan's time at the UN, the United States had no big stick. The nation had seen a dozen years of inner turmoil, one President assassinated, a second broken by Vietnam and a third driven out for political corruption. A Vice President had left office one step ahead of the sheriff. Ford and Rockefeller, neither of them elected by the people, led a makeshift administration. Relations between the Congress and the Executive were a deadlock of mutual suspicion. The economy was askew. The picture of America abroad was one of confusion. Perhaps this was one reason that Moynihan shouted as loudly as he could.

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Books: BREAKING SACRED SILENCES

SOPHIE'S CHOICE

William Styron
Random House, $12.95, 472 pp.

Larzer Ziff

IN THE SUMMER of 1947, the narrator of *Sophie's Choice,* whom William Styron asks us to accept as his twenty-two-year-old self, rents a room in the Brooklyn house of Mrs. Yetta Zimmerman. The lodgers in the house and the tone of the surrounding neighborhood are so intensely Jewish as to be positively exotic for the ex-Marine, ex-Duke University, ex-Tidewater author bent on writing a novel in which he must imagine himself into the causes of the suicide of his heroine, Maria Hunt, a young woman he had known in high school. She had died in despair, but the young Styron is all too aware that he has led a life much like the life of other Americans of his age, troubled only by minor guilts and major yearnings and remote from the psychic condition at the center of his intended work, for all his familiarity with its milieu. Although he does not then realize it, he is in Jewish Brooklyn to borrow the trouble his art needs.

Rather than accepting the exoticism of his environment as a desirable hedge around the privacy of his creative consciousness, then, he casts forth furtive Southern filaments with which to attach his new surroundings to the needs of his inner self. Southerners, he reasons, have always responded more warmly to Jews than Northerners: in part because of a shared affinity for the obdurate patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, and in part—baleful fact that becomes a tie that must be made to bind—because Southerners already have their sacrificial lamb in the Negro race. Indeed, Styron would not have been in those Brooklyn lodgings, freed for a season from the need to earn his bread, were it not for a legacy of $500, his share of his father's freaky discovery that year of a cache of money in the family house in Virginia. Successfully hidden for almost a century, the money had been received by his great-grandfather for the sale of a slave, a particularly nasty transaction in that it broke up a family and sent a sixteen-year old boy (notably named Artiste) from the relative comfort of a Tidewater farm to the hell of the Georgia turpentine mills.

At Mrs. Zimmerman's the young author is immediately and intensely attracted to Sophie, the survivor of another hell, Auschwitz, and although the pull is strongly erotic—she is beautiful and her couplings with her lover, Nathan, occur audibly over his head—it also gains strength from the promise it has of shriving him of his guilty acceptance of Artiste's head-price. In the long run, Sophie, whom he learns is Polish, not Jewish, so that for all her otherness, her being victimized in parallel with Artiste, she is also akin to him, another white Christian island in a sea of Jews, this Sophie will become the center of another novel, *Sophie's Choice,* completed more than thirty years after that summer. But in 1947 her anguish initially serves to sensitize him to the despair of his heroine, Maria, of whom she reminds him.

During the historical present of *Sophie's Choice,* the young author sees the relationship of Sophie and Nathan through to its fatal end and listens at great length to her conflicting, evasive, calculating, yet eventually full and passionate account of her life. She has been the generalized victim of an incomprehensible historical atrocity and the personal victim of a deliberately satanic moral atrocity, yet she feels the guilt of a perpetrator. He comes to experience what it will take him another thirty years to articulate, the structure of feeling summarized thus by Simone Weil: "Affliction stamps the soul to its very depths with the scorn, the disgust and even the self-hatred and sense of guilt that crime logically should produce but actually does not."

The historical present of the novel, then, comes to us within the controlling voice of the contemporary present of a celebrated, mature author who shares his musings about his subject with the reader. He speaks of the research he conducted into the holocaust and he sees what he experienced in the late '40s through the meaning it acquired from events in the '50s and '60s. Sophie's story must be the vehicle for his understanding the nightmare of contemporary history.

In one of the novel's early scenes the narrator is at a beach with Sophie in company with a group of young, clever, bookish, attractive Jews whose conversation is sharp with the pain of their self-awareness, at which, it seems, they have all arrived through psychoanalysis. The young author, a glutton for words, is sated, made positively dizzy by the novelty and daring of their terms—penis envy, oral sex, orgasmic function. But for Sophie, the survivor, there is only disgust. In what the author calls "a lovely gem of a phrase," she denounces the mood of the group as "unearned unhappiness."

Indeed, in context, it is a gemlike phrase (one also, it must be noted, that Styron slyly invites us to apply to the fiction of his Jewish contemporaries who were also beginning their assault upon American literature in 1947). But it is a phrase that can be brought home to Styron's door. Here still remains, we might say, this sprawling, slovenly America, a rural bumpkin converted in a twinkling into an urban terrorist, a society electric with implicit patricide of a scope to match the explicit fratricide of a century ago. With so much earned unhappiness in his America, why must the possessor of the intelligence that realized *Nat Turner* in its symbolic fullness and of a mastery of naturalistic narrative technique unmatched by his American peers (so that he is almost single-handedly sustaining the tradition of the novel as the tradition of great storytelling), why must he seek a vehicle for our

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Someday I will understand Auschwitz. This was a brave statement but innocently absurd. No one will ever understand Auschwitz. What I might have set down with more accuracy would have been: Someday I will write about Sophie's life and death, and thereby help demonstrate how absolute evil is never extinguished from the world. *Auschwitz itself remains inexplicable.*

—Sophie's Choice

condition outside the circumstances of this continent? Why import unhappiness?

It is a question of which Styron is acutely aware throughout *Sophie's Choice*. At the close of the summer of '47 Sophie comes to his bed, although she is on the eve of returning to her lover and to certain death, and gives him as an unconditional gift the fulfillment of every erotic fantasy that haunted him since his puberty. She matches the capacity of his imagination. But she is unaffected by the encounter, and Styron thus reveals, consciously or not, that the creative task he undertook in writing about Sophie is one in which he can only hope to unburden himself; the horror remains intact and unaffected for all his profound and passionate concern.

Still, he has to make Sophie's story yield its larger meaning, spurred, among other things, by his reading of George Steiner on the holocaust. For all he learned from Steiner, he resents the suggestion that silence is the only fit answer to what occurred, that what was unspeakable is best left unspoken. To acquiesce, he affirms, is to conspire to permit evil to retain a privileged status. Rather, through telling Sophie's story he will have his stab at understanding massive evil.

Sophie's Choice, then, continues on from *Nat Turner;* it is a further study of the intrusion into human history of an evil so enormous that historical determination alone is inadequate to account for it. But whereas Nat, unable to pray in the opening scene in jail, does in the morning scene at the close have a Bible given him and with it once again bridges social evil and divine benevolence—foreshadows, that is, the actual end of the institution of Negro slavery—the narrator of Sophie's choice has since the holocaust experienced no correlative to emancipation but is ridden by the renewed horrors of the '50s, '60s, and early '70s. In the final scene, the young author having recently masqueraded as a Presbyterian minister awakes on the beach in the morning to find that it is morning—excellent and fair but not a judgment day—only morning.

The Nazi perpetrator of the central, personal crime against Sophie's moral identity assaults her because as a death-camp official he has become so accustomed to gross atrocities that, he realizes, they are acceptable and sinless because there is no God to enforce such a judgment of them. Once a religious man, he longs for the return of God and so devises an act so sinful that it must be recognized as sin and therefore must restore a judging God. His action and reasoning are at the core of Styron's attempt to understand Auschwitz, and before the reader assesses his success Styron himself measures it in the line quoted on these pages.

There is a certain weakness inherent in Styron's dependence upon Sophie's voice for so much of the narrative because she talks of a moral and physical landscape alien to the listening young man. Although her listener, he is, of course, also her creator and the convention of his listening and reflecting at times appears not so much to enrich what she says as to compensate for deficiencies in the power of the telling. But his narrative mastery continues to be astounding and since Sophie's story is always part of the particular story of what happened in Brooklyn in 1947 as well as part of the monumental story of what happened in Poland during the war his sheer virtuosity keeps the frail account of Sophie from snapping under the weight it must bear.

When Styron himself bypasses Sophie and directly imagines the Polish scenes, calling them up almost as incantations, he is superb. The greatest of these scenes occurs toward the close of the novel, and as in *Nat Turner* he evokes pity, fear, terror, and theological anguish without recourse to extended descriptions of the sensationally brutal episodes that lie ready to hand in the record. The description of the journey of the trainload of prisoners from Warsaw to Auschwitz cuts through every callous that has grown upon our consciousnesses after our many exposures to holocaust literature, and in such writing, far more than in the story of Sophie herself, Styron does, indeed, assert art's power and thus art's right to break in upon even sacred silence.

An exercise in advocacy

A PRIVATE CHOICE:
ABORTION IN AMERICA IN THE SEVENTIES

John T. Noonan, Jr.
The Free Press, $11.95, 288 pp.

Robert G. Hoyt

FIRST, definition. This book is an exercise in advocacy. It is written to promote the adoption of a constitutional amendment that would overrule the Supreme Court's 1973 decisions in *RXOE* V. *Wade* and *Doe* v. *Bolton*. These decisions had the effect of invalidating state laws restricting abortion and substituted for them the Court's own criteria, which create a virtually unlimited "liberty of abortion" so far as criminal law is concerned. The form of amendment favored by the author is one largely of his own devising which, he reports, has received more support in Congress than any similar proposal. The draft amendment would not express any national judgment on the legality or morality of abortion; rather, it would restore to Congress in its jurisdictions (e.g., the territories) and to state legislatures in theirs "the power to protect life, including the unborn"; that is, to restrict or regulate or place conditions on abortion.

On the road to this recommendation the book critically examines the jurisprudential philosphy (or philosophies) and the constitutional theory embedded in the Court's decisions. The author inquires also into the sources of the social and

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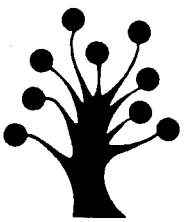
political pressures that have made abortion newly respectable, and locates them in certain elites, mostly male, white and affluent; he raises questions about the motives at work and the purposes sought. He dissects what he calls the "legends" used to support the abortion cause and examines the performance of the media in reporting the content of the decisions. Another chapter, or "inquiry," deals with the "dynamism" of the decisions—for example, their consequences for medical practice in the carrying out of abortions and also for the regulation of research on fetuses destined for abortion.

With sometimes bitter irony, the book traces the transformation of language occasioned by the felt need of abortion advocates to distract themselves and others from the reality of the "procedure." Its chapters on "the object of the liberty"—the being in the womb—and on "the masks of the liberty"—the disguises used to shield what is actually done in an abortion—are meant to require the cooperative reader to look steadily and gravely at what the fetus is and what happens to "it" in the operation.

Next, a partial assessment. Later I will announce personal doubts and reservations. First it should be acknowledged that this book is a model of its kind, as was to be expected of John T. Noonan, Jr., professor of law at Berkeley, author of *Contraception*, scholar among scholars. The jacket blurb accurately suggests that people on all sides of the abortion controversy will be challenged by it. I would add that no one emotionally and intellectually equipped to attend to what the text actually says will fail to learn nrom it.

One thing any controversialist might learn is the power of restraint. This book rises out of a passionate double commitment, to the protection of the unborn and to the principled construction of law; yet the author's passion does not tempt him into the unpardonable and damaging excesses of polemicism that have marked and still mark this controversy. If they read him closely enough the more zealous partisans of Professor Noonan's own side of the conflict will experience rebuke, though not as painfully as some of his opponents, particularly Mr. Justice Blackmun.

Noonan's critique of Blackmun's majority opinion in *Roe* v. *Wade* is one of the two achievements of the book most impressive to me. He demonstrates in the opinion a regression to the bad old days when the high court constituted itself a superlegislature by overriding state laws intended to protect the health or other rights of workers. Such legislation sought, for example, to restrict the liberty of certain employers to work their employes more than 60 hours a week; but the Court discovered in the Constitution a *laissez faire* understanding of political economy that made this "liberty" untouchable by lawmakers. Responding to



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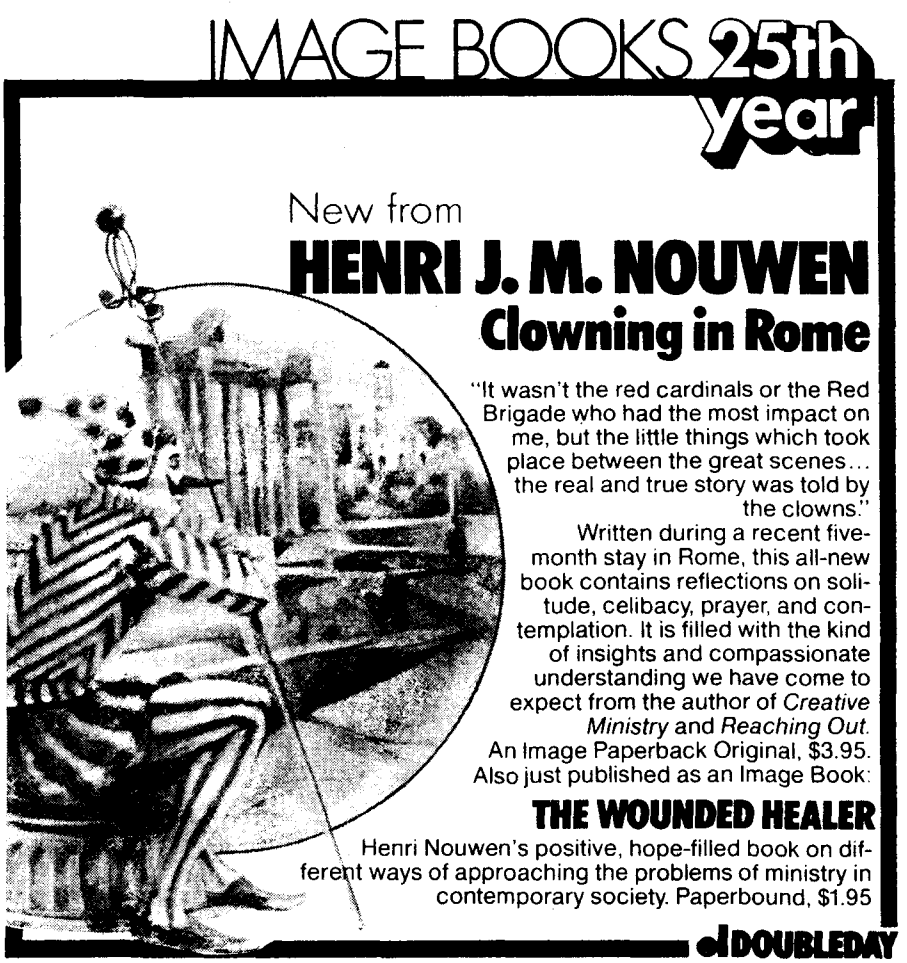
such decisions, Holmes and Brandeis in dissent, Frankfurter as a private scholar and finally Black speaking for a majority established the classic principles of self-restraint that prevent the Court from using "the impersonal authority of the Constitution" (Frankfurter) to run the country their way.

This tradition, now nearly sacred, is simply ignored in the '73 abortion decisions. The traditional recognition of abortion as a social question put to the community reflects obvious realities. Abortion affects men as well as women, doctors, lawyers, nurses and many others besides those most immediately concerned; above all it affects the fetus. To redefine abortion as "a private choice," Justice Blackmun had to insert into the Constitution an unassailable liberty founded on an all but absolute right of privacy that shielded the individual pregnant woman from all but the most minimal societal influences with regard to the choice of abortion throughout the term of her pregnancy. Finding the conflict over the status of the fetus unresolvable in theory, he resolved it in practice by removing the protection of the law from all fetuses as a class. In so doing he removed from the political forum an issue that, precisely because of the profound controversy surrounding it, calls for resolution by the people through the elected representatives closest to them. Instead, with the support of six other Justices, he enacted his own preferences and prejudices into law.

The second major achievement of the book (one for which my praise will later be qualified) is to be found in the careful moderation of Professor Noonan's proposed amendment. He is confident that given time the Court's own self-correcting processes will overturn the abortion decisions, but he is unwilling to wait while fetuses die in an epidemic. But though he is absolutely opposed on ethical grounds to "the liberty of abortion," as constitutional scholar he is reluctant to enact by amendment (or to empower Congress to enact) a national criminal statute that would restrict the liberty. His draft amendment, which received a tie vote in the relevant Senate subcommittee (and therefore failed of adoption), seeks victory for his own views on abortion without doing violence to his understanding of the American constitutional and political system. It is perfectly coherent with his earlier critique of the abortion decisions. Given acceptance of that critique, it is all but compellingly persuasive.

Finally, my reservations. They have to do with the gaps in the book, what it does not say. John Noonan is an advocate of most unusual fairness, but nonetheless an advocate. His presentations of the child in the womb and of the abortion operation are calmly worded and straightforward, yet powerful, and he reinforces them with plots and scenes from Hemingway, Didion, O'Neill, Updike and Roth. In contrast the dilemma of a woman for whom pregnancy is tragedy is barely acknowledged, never made vivid. He is devastating in his critique of the euphemized language of law, medicine and press agentry used to encourage essentially casual attitudes toward abortion; his own use of language will alert serious feminists of either gender that he is not of their number. Professor Noonan appears closed to revisionist understanding of legal and/or *moral* codes inherited from an age of patriarchy, codes that are *man*-made and may therefore serve male rather than human purposes. On the evidence of this book he would not agree that normal perceptions may be social constructs, or that the natural law requirements of a time when earth was empty and death rates high may alter with new conditions.

For Noonan, claims rising out of the facts of social disorder, experiences of personal anguish and hopelessness and the principles of distributive justice are of a secondary order, not to be placed on the same scale with the biological-philosophical truth that human life is continuous from the moment of conception. Nor is he in apparent doubt that human beings are never placed in a situation where they must choose evil, mourn-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fully, because no not-evil choice can be made.

Largely because of the abortion controversy, and because of recent promptings by other scholars critically loyal to the Christian/Catholic tradition, the reviewer is no longer certain of these certitudes. I cannot understand, for example, why the rigorous argumentation employed in the abortion controversy cannot be brought to bear with respect to the nuclear arms race and other issues of large consequence and lead us to equally firm conclusions. The reason is, I suspect, that such rationality is not reasonable, does not respect the complexity of human reality, personal or political.

As for Professor Noonan's draft amendment: Before agreeing to support it one wishes to ask what will follow its adoption. If state legislatures are once more able to pass laws expressing the interest of society in abortion decisions, what kind of laws would the author of *A Private Choice* favor, and what kind of lobbying and electioneering tactics would he find acceptable in their support? Does it weigh with him that candidates elected to defend the right to life tend also to be restrictive of other rights besides the liberty of abortion—to be militaristic jingos abroad and reactionary at home on issues of welfare and employment?

In this book, deponent sayeth not—but I have a clue. A dozen years ago I was hired to rewrite several chapters of a book summing up the proceedings of the 1967 Harvard University-Kennedy Foundation symposium on abortion. My impossible commission was to play it down the middle as a good reporter should. In the event, my final draft of the crucial final chapter on law wound up with the crucial final paragraphs slanted toward compromise. The laws should reflect the diversity of conscientious judgment on abortion. They should recognize the trauma and the tragedy of the act, and they should seek to minimize the incidence of abortion—not, however, by forbidding it but by generously supporting the freedom to decide in favor of the gladness of birth. By implication (not quite spelled out), the decision was to be made, not by a judge or a panel of doctors, social workers and counselors, but by the woman: Abortion is truly a social concern but ultimately a private choice.

My final draft was submitted to Professor Noonan, among others, for remiew. When the book appeared the closing paragraphs of the draft were excised. There remained much emphasis on the duty to provide social support for unwillingly pregnant women, but in the last analysis the state would decide according to criteria set down in law. On the evidence of *A Private Choice*, I believe John Noonan would support a similar policy. I can't agree in principle, and I don't think such laws, if they are enacted, will work.

Camus as stranger

ALBERT CAMUS

Herbert R. Lottman

Doubleday, $16.95, 753 pp.

Wallace Fowlie

CAMUS HIMSELF used to say, when questioned about his life story, that the history of poor families does not make interesting biographical reading. To contradict such theory, the journalist and correspondent for *Publishers' Weekly*, Herbert Lottman, has written an unusually long biography of the French writer whose tragic death in an automobile crash occurred twenty years ago.

The book appears to be a detailed and complete account of Camus's exterior life of which the first half was spent in Algeria, especially in Algiers, and the second half largely in Paris where he gradually grew into one of the most eminent figures of his generation: the leading exponent of "absurdism," the defender of the rights of man, a gifted writer whose books (novels, plays, essays) touched the young as convincingly as only one other writer of that day did: his friend and opponent, Jean-Paul Sartre.

Obviously a warm admirer of Camus, Mr. Lottman goes to great pains to emphasize the most appealing and the most noble traits of his subject. But his book is as much history as it is biography, literary and political history always related to Camus but at times so tenuously that his figure is dimmed. The prodigious factual history of this biography comes from extensive research, not dependent on published sources but largely on interviews with numberless people connected directly or indirectly with Camus, who live today in Algeria, France, United States, Germany, Italy, Morocco, Israel. Friends of Camus, as well as personal and political enemies, have helped Mr. Lottman in the task of amassing his documentation.

The literary and political history comes largely from printed material. The preparation of each of Camus's books is carefully narrated, and rather than giving his own critical estimate of the book, this biographer prefers to quote abundantly from the reviews of each book. The first impressions of a book tend to be different from later judgments. This part of Mr.

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Lottman's study is most useful for new readers today of Camus. When he has been able to ascertain them, he does not hesitate to propose reasons for early critical approval or disapproval.

There is no other biography of Camus, although every one of the many critical studies provides leading biographical data. Many of the slight errors that have crept into studies on Camus (some of which Camus himself allowed to persist) have been corrected by Herbert Lottman. But after the corrections of dates and titles and references, after the almost day by day rehearsal of encounters, voyages, work, seizures of serious illness, swimming, soccer, amorous adventures, theater productions, writing projects carried out despite countless obstacles, after all that—the personality of Albert Camus remains elusive and ambiguous.

The careful reader of this first biography will wonder what is important, what is relevant in this mass of biographical and historical data. What were Camus's real feelings about Algeria as the problems in North Africa became more and more acute in the '50s? What were his real feelings about the controversy with Sartre over *L'Homme révolté (The Rebel)*, of all his books the one that comes closest to being an intellectual biography? The permanence of certain affections, based on gratitude, gives us the best image of nobility in this writer's character: his devotion to two teachers in Algiers: Louis Germain and Jean Grenier; his strong friendship for the Italian anti-Fascist writer and critic Nicola Chiaromonte; his admiration for Gide in whose Paris apartment he lived for some time (1 bis rue Vaneau); his close comradeship with the poet René Char whom he often saw at L'Isle-sur-Sorgue in the south, and in Paris on the rue de Chanaleilles where for a while Char and Camus occupied separate apartments in the same house.

In the specific case of a writer, and especially a writer of Camus's eminence, the biographer is constantly facing the problem of what to include and what to discard. To what degree can the published writings of a man explain and illuminate his life story? After all the facts have been ascertained and exposed, one wants to return to the books themselves and there rediscover the features and the spirit of Albert Camus. He was first and foremost an artist. Even the form of his journalism is admirable. In his best books, *La Peste* and *La Chute*, he writes a controlled but highly charged emotional prose.

His biography does not reveal as clearly as his books the dominant paradox of his life: his fundamental disinterestedness in political matters and his constant preoccupation with justice. Another paradox, so evident in his two early books: *L'Envers et l'Endroit* and *Noces*, opposes the beauty of the world with the sufferings of man. In the background, which Mr. Lottman provides, for the writing of those essays, we can follow Camus striving to formulate a philosophy that would exalt the life of the senses and at the same time justify political action.

The exterior life of Camus, while he was writing his novel *L'Etranger* and his essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, so meticulously documented in this biography, seems to have little connection with those two studies of "absurdism." Even the mood of the time, the war years of 1942 and 1943, does not totally explain the character of Meursault: his concern for the physical side of his nature and his indifference toward Christianity and the morality of the bourgeoisie. Today we remember these books not so much because of the theory they proclaim about the universe not being explicable, but because of their lyrical almost semi-rhetorical prose.

Future students of Camus will use this biography as an encyclopedia for information on the North African years, on the efforts to write for the stage, on the controversy with Sartre, on the award of the Nobel Prize, on the tragic death in 1960. And then they will turn to the books themselves, to the monologue of *La Chute* and to the stories in *L'Exil et le Royaume*, in order to discover how Albert Camus created his own form of humanism.

McCarthy, the celebratory

GROUND FOG AND NIGHT

Eugene J. McCarthy
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, $8.95, 58 pp.

Robert Phillips

"CELEBRATORY" IS THE WORD that best describes the poems in former Senator McCarthy's good-natured second collection. As a book, the forty-two poems reveal McCarthy's keen eye for the natural world and deep sympathy for wide ranges of the human experience.

He celebrates, first, other individuals who, through creative acts, have made beauty and order out of life's chaos. Among these poems are tributes to W.B. Yeats, Robert Frost, the Irish poet Austin Clarke, Edith Sitwell, Marcel Marceau, and Marc Chagall. (The Yeats, Frost, Clarke and Sitwell poems confirm McCarthy's wide reading of other contemporary poets, evidenced in his previous collection, *Other Things and the Aardvark* [Doubleday, 1970]. Three of that volume's best were "To Robert Lowell," "James Dickey," and "On the Death of Vernon Watkins While Playing Tennis.") With the exception of the third section of the Frost poem, which develops an elaborate and unfortunate metaphor of Frost as a Model T, these are successful poems. "The Book of Yeats" is a poem which could be improved by eliminating its archaic inversions.

A few poems praising man-made objects seem representative of other of McCarthy's concerns. The best is "The Camera," a soliloquy by that instrument which holds Popes and potentates at its call. Less successful are poems celebrating, of all things, "Eaton's Corrabsable Bond" and the defunct Park Lane Hotel in Toledo, Ohio. The latter poem, for some reason, is comprised largely of a catalogue of books found in that hotel's Room 204.

Third, McCarthy celebrates—or elevates—certain natural beauties which move him: cows, lionesses, roaches, mice, a Plymouth Rock hen, trees, honey, tumbleweed and fog. The sub-

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jects may all be natural, but his attitude varies. Some are treated with great seriousness, even reverence, such as his meditation on fog: "No sign of God is left above the fog. / Only the red-eyed tower stands / To tell of life / below." the same high-purpose marks his poem on the death of an old Plymouth Rock hen, one of the book's most memorable:

> Decapitated, she did not act
> Like a chicken with its head cut off.
> No pirouettes, no somersaults,
> No last indignity.
> Like an English queen, she died.
> On wings that had never known flight
> She flew, straight into the woodpile
> And there beat out slow death
> While her curdled voice ran out in blood.

Yet other poems are exceedingly lightweight, even silly:

> There once was a cow.
> Do not ask how
> but when bit by a fly
> she jumped so high
> she hurdled the moon. . .

There is, of course, nothing wrong with a serious poet writing light verse. Eliot, Auden and Roethke, to name three, were equally accomplished in both. And, in his *Complete Poems and Plays*, Eliot sandwiched his "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" between "Four Quartets" and "Murder in the Cathedral"! Nevertheless, in a slender volume of fifty-eight pages, it is disconcerting to find McCarthy's darker statements shuffled in the midst of his lighter. Lines on "trivial tripe with alabaster endive" come only a few pages after lines on the My Lai massacres, to the detriment of both poems. One simple solution would have have been to make separate sections within the book, avoiding abrupt wrenches in subject and tone. Another would be to simply wait, as did Howard Moss, until the poet had a sufficient amount of light verse and then publish a separate volume. In McCarthy's new book, the clown keeps peering over the shoulder of the saint.

McCarthy's best poems are the weightier ones, those on the human condition. Surprisingly, there is only one overtly political poem—"My Lai Conversation," just mentioned. Its irony and understatement are moving (though less so than his "Vietnam Statement" from the first collection.) Several confront the process of aging, such as "Courage at Sixty":

> "Broken things are powerful."
> Things about to break are stronger still.
> The last shot from the brittle bow is truest.

Another, "Your Garbage Man," is a fine statement on the continuous state of dying, which begins the minute one is born. McCarthy's garbage man is a modern Charon figure: "I carry you away many times / Before the mortician does his Job." A third memorable poem, "No Deposit—No Return," equates America's view of old people stuck in nursing homes with disposable glass bottles.

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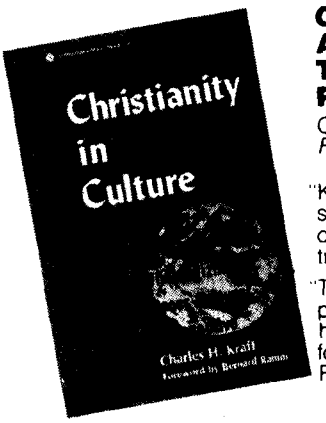

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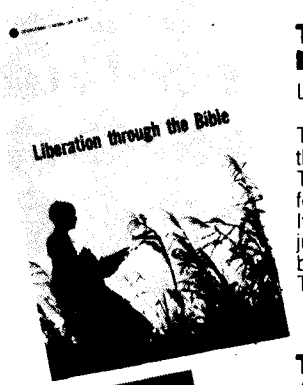

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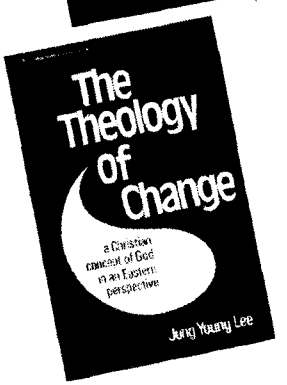

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"The Diagonal Dark Path" counterpoints these poems by vividly recreating the fears and temptations of childhood. These poems confirm that McCarthy is a poet, free of his earlier Yeatsian and Lowellian influences.

I wonder who's Kissinger now?

GOOD AS GOLD
Joseph Heller
***Simon & Schuster*, $12.95, 447 pp.**

Raymond A. Schroth

IT MAY SEEM ungrateful to suggest, after we had waited so impatiently for 13 years after *Catch 22* (1961) for *Something Happened* (1974) to appear, that Joseph Heller's very funny but slightly different third novel, *Good As Gold*, has come too soon.

In one sense, we can never have enough of Joseph Heller: we need him to articulate our common secret fears. For who can read the paranoid utterances of Robert Slocum in *Something Happened*'s opening pages and not recognize to some degree his own share in the competitive madness and chronic anxiety of American life?

> I get the willies when I see closed doors. Even at work, where I am doing so well now, the sight of a closed door is sometimes enough to make me dread that something horrible is behind it, something that is going to affect me adversely; if I am tired and dejected from a night of lies or booze or sex or just plain nerves or insomnia, I can almost smell the disaster mounting invisibly and flooding out toward me through the frosted glass panes. My hands may perspire, and my voice come out strange. I wonder why. . . .
>
> In the office in which I work there are five people of whom I am afraid. . . .

It is a book where God is a losing competitor with Sunday golf and whose Christ is merely an angry expletive, a book which sums up the spiritual emptiness of the 1970s so excruciatingly that it may be another decade before many critics adequately appreciate it and most Americans can read it with sufficient detachment.

And is there anyone who has been in the army or air force who is not somehow liberated from the painful absurdity of military memories because Heller has captured that absurdity, made us stare it in the face, and then mocked it in *Catch-22?* Thus Heller novels focus with unrelenting concentration on the real terror, darkness, evil and absurdity of contemporary life and death, then pull us through the darkness to the brink of light—to the edge of faith—with weak and scarcely admirable protagonists (since Heller, the word hero applies less and less to characters in American fiction), themselves on the brink of despair, who survive simply because they struggle to hang onto some last scrap of integrity, self-respect, or genuine love. Why doesn't someone as emotionally maimed as Bob Slocum kill himself?, we ask on every page of *Something Happened*. Maybe because his paranoia has not overwhelmed his last scrap of individuality. And maybe because the experience of caring for Derek, his "secret" retarded child, has taught him —though I doubt he would put it this way—that our lives do belong to one another.

But the first two Heller novels have an odd lifespan in the public consciousness. It was not until the late 1960s that *Catch-22* really caught on—when, confronted with what the same amoral military mind was wreaking in Vietnam, we saw that, in spite of the laughs, it was not a "satire" of the military, but a "black humor" warning about a murderous streak in the American character, just as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* was a warning about the totalitarian fascist personalities in our culture who would dominate the government after World War II, glare down from the Pentagon windows on the Armies of the Night in October 1967 and order the Chicago police to club in the heads of what Tom Wicker called "our children" at the Democratic Convention in 1968.

It may be that *Good as Gold*, which has had a mixed reception, has arrived before *Something Happened* has had time to sink in. Few reviews at the time did justice to the horrifying possibility that suburban WASP Slocum—with his frustrated petty dreams (to give a three-minute speech at his nameless corporation's convention), his adolescent sexual fantasies, his continual marital infidelity, his meaningless well-paying job and his disintegrating family—was *the* representative American of the 1970s. Now, before *Something Happened* has been fully discussed, we must deal with *Good as Gold*, another painful portrait of a bright but almost empty man watching his soul melt in his hands.

When Heller visited Fordham to talk to students immediately after *Something Happened* came out, his new book was already under way. I told him I hoped it would be about academic life; he said that rather it would be about Kissinger. Well, yes and no.

Kissinger as a fictional character is an appropriate challenge for a novelist of Heller's stature; for perhaps only fiction, at this stage, could capture that unfortunate blend of power-hunger, amorality, academic "brilliance," petty vanity and criminality that the Kissinger career personifies—to say nothing of the way the Kissinger *persona* has been presented by the media and absorbed by the public mind. But Heller has backed off half-way from that challenge and taken a more universal one: the germ of Kissingerism within each of us and in himself, and specifically in Bruce Gold, a Hellerish 48-year-old Jewish, CUNY Brooklyn College English professor and middleweight popular intellectual on-the-make, obsessed with a righteous hatred of Kissinger—a hatred stoked by a DosPassian clipping file that fleshes (or puffs) out a large section of the book.

But Gold's real tension comes from the fact that his own morality dangles barely a ledge above his enemy's. He knows the corrupting tendency within himself, in every intellectual and journalist to be corrupted by the mere smell of power, to become a Kissinger; to publish articles and reviews that will flatter

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the President who might invite him to dinner at the White House and dangle before him the possibility of a government job (a "spokesman," a "senior official," Secretary of State!!!); to use women (the government secretaries are named Dusty, Rusty, Misty and Christy and the WASP White House aide, who has recently been married to Sallie, Ellie, Kelly, Norah, etc. . . ., advises Gold to dump his wife and marry the daughter of an insane Establishment anti-Semite before joining the team) as mere adjuncts of the male ego; and, worst of all, to forsake his heritage, to forget or deny he is a Jew.

How much will Gold sell out once he gets those calls from Washington telling him, in language that echoes of *Catch-22*, that the President wants to see him immediately although he'll never know if he's not there; that his appointment is guaranteed although we can't promise anything; that Gold should testify in Congress for higher education and just tell the truth even if he has to lie?

He has already compromised a lot, and we think we know the answer when he asks himself in the last pages how much lower he must crawl to reach the top. It is a family rule that Golds—good Jews—don't get divorced; but Gold is deserting his wife. He has become a lazy writer and teacher. He has promised a quicky book to a publisher friend on the American Jewish experience—a sort of Jewish *Roots*—although he barely comprehends his own Coney Island boyhood or the real lives of his big bickering family who keep clippings of all his articles but apparently have no idea what he is talking about. At the university he always schedules a Friday afternoon class to keep enrollment low, he skips office hours and gives surprise exams when he is unprepared. But he has thrived at the university as an academic huckster—renaming basic English courses with titles like "The Role of Women, Blacks, and Drugs in Sex and Religion in World and American Films and Literature" and "Monarchy and Monotheism in Literature from Medieval to Modern," which is really Gold's worn-out course on Shakespeare's history plays.

It was now possible, in fact, thanks to the enterprise of Gold, for a student to graduate as an English major after spending all four years of academic study watching foreign motion pictures in a darkened classroom without being exposed for even one moment to any other light but that of a movie projector.

In the end, of course, the government post is as much an illusion as the images flickering on the English department's screen; and, while the family dinner sequences are almost brutally realistic, we are left wondering to what degree Gold's zany phone conversations with the White House aide, his trips to Washington, his one-day meeting of the Presidential Commission on Higher Education and its much-praised unread-unwritten (by Gold) Report, his encounters with the wacky Establishment bigot power broker, Hugh Biddle Conover, and his simultaneous love affairs with Andrea Biddle Conover and his daughter's school teacher are real events or, more likely, the dangerous warning-sign fantasies of a Jewish Slocum, the fate of a would-be creative person in mid-life cut off from his roots, who has no social, intellectual, or religious visions—only wild dreams, dreams of being a celebrity when he has nothing more substantial to celebrate than his own half-baked fame.

Years at the 'Worker'

A YEAR AT THE CATHOLIC WORKER
Marc H. Ellis
Paulist Press, $1.95 paper, 140 pp.

CONFESSIONS OF A CATHOLIC WORKER
Michael Garvey
Thomas More Press, $6.95, 132 pp.

Michael True

ALTHOUGH BOTH of these books are based upon journals dealing with the authors' years at Catholic Worker Houses of Hospitality, each book is different in tone and emphasis. Marc Ellis tells us as much about himself, "born and raised a Jew in the suburban city of North Miami Beach, Florida," as he does about the Bowery people he lived with and cared for, at St. Joseph House, from September 1974 to May 1975. After graduation from Florida State University, he went to the Lower East Side out of some dissatisfaction with his own way of living and in search of guidance and rebirth. Although the experience brought no resolution to his personal dilemma, it did bring, in Peter Maurin's words, clarification of thought. In the afflictions of the homeless, the alcoholics, and the mentally ill, Ellis says, "I began to recognize my own affliction."

At the Worker, life poses basic questions about our social system, about religion and prosperity in a world of oppressed people, with particular urgency. It is a place where gaiety can be offensive

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and where violence flares among the destitute. "The sight and smells of cheap wine, worn clothes, and dirt are familiar," Ellis writes, after six months; "their reality has become part of my life." So have the people who make up the community: Rosienne, a shopping-bag lady in her late forties, who kisses everyone good night before she goes to sleep in doorways; David, seventeen—retarded and epileptic—whose home is often the psycho ward at Bellevue Hospital; and Jody, slightly older, who one night "drew a knife and told me if the door closed behind me [to keep him out] he was going to slit my throat."

But it is also a community of service and of volunteers, age eighteen to seventy-eight, whose strength of character comes "from having plunged into living life rather than having been protected from it" and from "striking out into the reality of suffering." There are also those nearby, whose lives are formed by the radical social and religious alternative of the movement: Father Lyle Young, who comes to say Mass every Monday evening; Father Daniel Berrigan, who conducts a retreat and befriends the young volunteers; Dorothy Day, still "tough and inspirational." And there are the "sympathetic, intellectual observers," as Robert Coles describes them in the Preface: William Miller, who writes a Foreword to the book, Father Henri Nouwen and Michael Harrington, who come to lecture at Mary House on Friday evenings.

Michael Garvey's "confessions," casual and colloquial as a telephone conversation with a close friend, give a somewhat different, but equally significant view of the Worker. In this instance, the subject is Peter Maurin House, in Davenport, Iowa, rather than the often described houses in New York City or Chicago. Though smaller than the others, Peter Maurin House appears to possess the traditional strengths of the movement, after forty-five years—its loyalty to the church, its radical, nonviolent perspective, and, above all else, its respect for people.

Garvey describes his experiences with a simplicity and wit that speak well both for him as a writer and for the enduring radical movement that sustains him. He writes well about practical as well as ideological matters, about soap as well as faith. "For me, and for most other people in it, the Catholic Worker Movement, or at least the practice of hospitality, is the best way to experience and express the presence of the church, the Mystical Body of Christ at work and play in the world. Goofy experiments with liturgy, boring debates of bishops, we will always have with us, but we also have the Gospels, seven sacraments, the lives of the saints and a rich tradition." He is modest, too, adding, "I've been here a little more than a year, and I have no idea how much longer I'll stay—I may be gone when you read this."

But each day spent feeding the hungry and housing the homeless is a kind of victory. And these necessary and informative books, like Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), give as close a look at society, from the perspective of the victims, as one is likely to get. Powerful evidence of the growing strength of the movement in its third generation, they deserve a place beside the best literature on the Catholic Worker contributions to the American radical tradition—beside, that is, Dorothy Day's columns "On Pilgrimage," Ammon Hennacy's memoirs, and Jack Cook's *Rags of Time: A Season in Prison* (1972). They dramatize the fact, also, that social commitment among the young did not expire with the 1960s.

REVIEWERS

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ROBERT G. HOYT is executive editor of Christianity and Crisis. He was founding editor of the *National Catholic Reporter* and one of the editor/writers of *The Terrible Choice: The Abortion Dilemma* (Bantam).

WALLACE FOWLIE will be teaching next year at Sewanee. His most recent book is *Journal of Rehearsals: A Memoir* (Duke).

ROBERT PHILLIPS's *Last and Lost Poems of Delmore Schwartz* will be published shortly by Vanguard.

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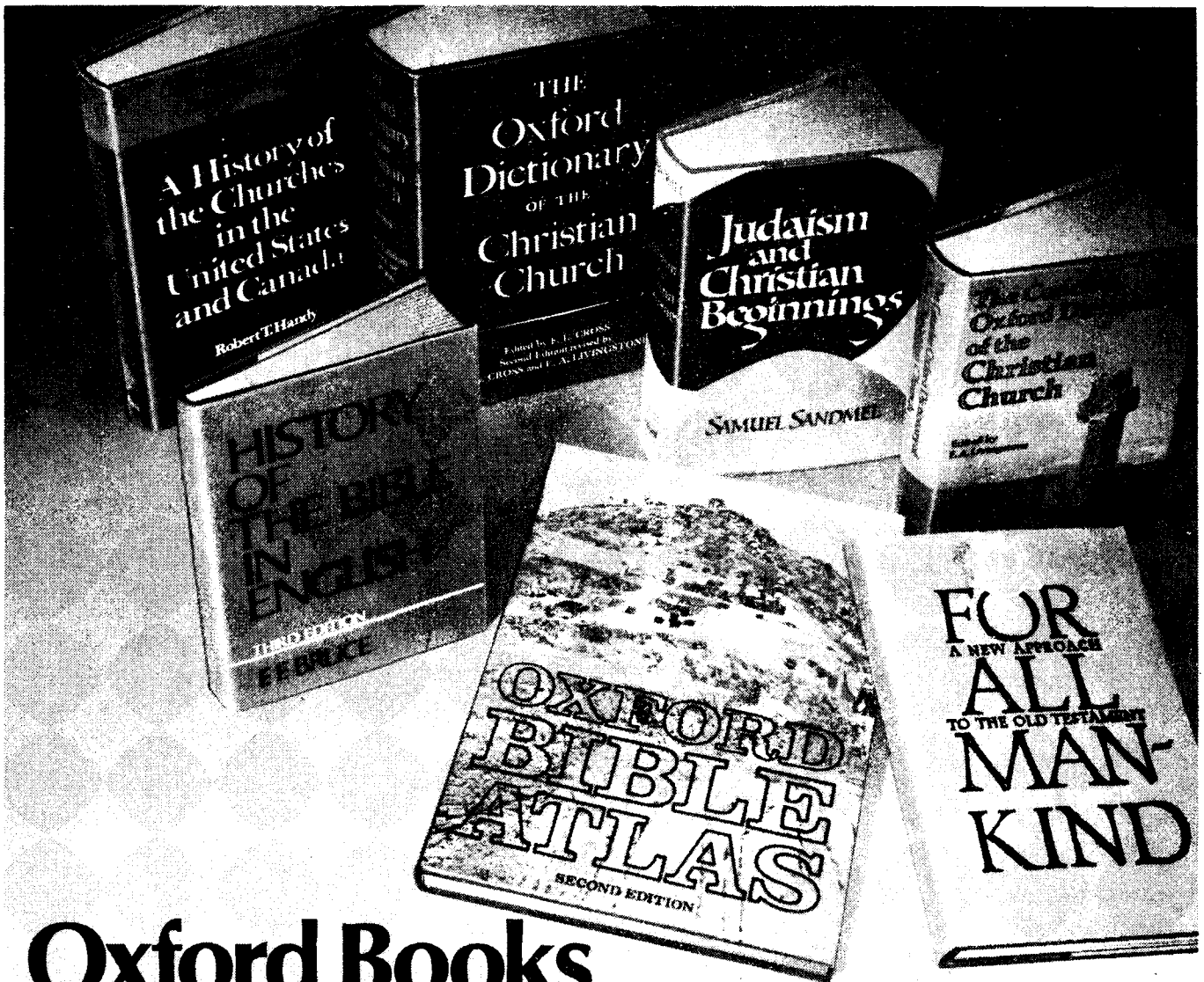
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